

BEHIND THE CURTAINS OF POLA:

CREATING AND NEGOTIATING LOCAL MARKETS IN SRI LANKA

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to

Prof. Nihal Perera

for all his kindness, wisdom and hardwork

invested in bringing out

the best in me

as a student and a person.

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION/THESIS/RESEARCH PAPER/CREATIVE PROJECT: Behind the Curtains of Pola: Creating and Negotiating Local Markets in Sri Lanka

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The *pola*, a locally built and operated market and social institution in Sri Lanka, has survived over a century. From the 1970s, politicians, planners and policy-makers have attempted to modernize it; the peak is the national government pledging LKR3,000 millions in 2014. Enormous resources have been wasted due to the gap between the perception among formal actors and the lived *pola*. This study aimed to understand the *pola* from the *pola*-people's vantage points. I became a member of Kottawa-Pola and the circuit. I learned that the *pola* is not its physicality or a thing—as the state and planners do—but a journey and has a lived self that needs to be acknowledged. Even when the government restructures, the *pola*-people use the provisions as raw material to defy and overcome the intervention. The *pola* is an ingenious institution produced by people to navigate and construct contemporary urban environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After an intensive period of 12 months, today I am writing this note of thanks as the final task for my Master's thesis. As any other end, this too marks a beginning; the journey of this thesis research empowered me in numerous ways and prepared me to make the next move confidently. It made me a good listener, a patient observer, an empathetic researcher and above all a human being who is grateful for the opportunity to work with the ordinary people, sharing the same ground on which we all negotiate life.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In simple terms, the *pola* in Sri Lanka is a local market for vegetables, fruits and other perishable food items such as fish, meat, rice and spices. It is not unusual to find inexpensive household items such as pottery, brooms and clothing. There is no set list of merchandise or any control/monitoring over merchandise in many *polas*. Functionally, this is a place of buying and selling. Physically, it is created out of stalls and small shop structures made of a mixture of temporary, semi-permanent, and permanent material, concentrated in one place. Overall, the *pola* usually meets once or few times a week at this specific site, on other days the vendors travel to other *polas* in nearby localities. Thus, the *pola* brings together a vendor community that is circulating in a region –according to a predictable time pattern- with local communities in the region. However, it is not the same group that travels to every *pola*, but their circuits (*pola raumas*) are diverse and are not congruent. (See Chapter Four) This meeting fulfills the everyday needs of local households and setup a social milieu for the locals to meet each other and their trader friends. Some local residents turn into vendors on *pola* days as well.

In short, it is a key social institution in Sri Lanka that is not well studied. The goal of this thesis project is to understand the *pola* as a social space/institution and to document the processes in which *polas* has been built and reproduced for decades. I studied Kottawa Pola in detail, but complemented by Malabe, Maharagama and Delkanda polas which provide the breadth for the study.

The Meaning

When translated into English (as elaborated in Chapter Two), policy makers and planning practitioners usually refer to *pola* as a ‘public fair’ and scholars call it a ‘rural periodic market’ (i.e.: Jackson 1977). Yet, *polas* are neither fully public nor are limited to the functions of a ‘fair’. They are neither limited to the rural nor to the functions of a market. *Polas* are located in both urban and rural areas, and they are both large and small. They are not isolated events that serve one locality, but are networked in ways meaningful to both buyers, sellers, and helpers and its cycles consider customer behavior and how weekly merchandise stocks are sold (See Chapter Four). Some *polas* are specialized in certain kinds of merchandise, for example, Narammala for betel leaves, or a particular type of transaction, such as wholesale or retail. Most *polas* perform all or a combination of these functions at the same time, or at different times.

Pola is in Sinhala (the language of the ethnic majority, Sinhalese). I use this term as my investigations focus on the Sinhalese areas. In Tamil speaking areas (largest ethnic minority), there is a similar place and social institution called *santhai* or *chanthai*. In ethnically mixed (Sinhala and Muslim) areas like Gampola, the same place is identified by different names such as *markari kadei* (Lit: vegetable market) (Haniffa 2016). There are other terms that are adopted from other languages including English; like *markettuwa* deriving from market; at times the same English word is used but with a different pronunciation: *märkət* (with a stressed ‘r’) as opposed to *mä:(r)kət*. Another interesting name is *bazaar* which Haniffa (2016) believes a new name used in Gampola. According to her, the term *bazaar* was brought by the locals who work in the Middle East, from where they lived. They now call the *pola* by that name: *bazaar*. In some areas like Colombo, *bazaar* is not a new term, yet not used as an equivalent to *pola*.

All these names signal that it is a market. Yet no other market in Sri Lanka is called *pola* or any equivalent in other local languages. The everyday markets built in almost every city by the government are called ‘markets’ or ‘*podu welandapolas*’ and is clearly distinct from the *pola* in regard to the idea, image and the use of word as a identifier. While *welandapola* ends with *pola*, this means place in this context; a place of commerce. In this sense, *pola* could be place in history. It is now a very specific place: the *pola*.

When my own mother says that she is going to the ‘market’ she is referring to the enclosed marketplace that is open every day and is built by the local government, she does not refer to the *pola*, the open market that only takes place on Wednesdays and Sundays, i.e., in my hometown of Kurunegala. Yet I have encountered incidents in which the members of young- middle class society simply translate the term *pola* into ‘open market’ or simply borrow the term ‘farmer’s market’. This naming is shaped by their Westernized view. Haniffa (2016) further explained how some people use the word ‘town’ to say that they are going to *pola*, because for them, *pola* is the most active place is the center of town.

As evident above, the name itself has heavily influenced by the local culture and its changes; the mental image attached to the term *pola* too has changed over time in almost every region. There is no one model to explain *pola* as a place or a concept/image, simply because the changes in social processes are specific to the locality. For the same reason, the structure, organization and the content of *polas* have been highly contested and/or re-shaped almost everywhere. What is most important is that *pola* is a specific type of institution and network that has sustained in all parts of the country, evidently for more than a century. (Jackson 1977)

Therefore, the term *pola* (signifier) can produce different meanings (signified) to different groups. To most customers who visit a specific *pola* on same site on same day of each week, *pola* means that a particular market they visit at a particular time. For *pola* traders and vendors who travel to many locations to conduct *polas* on different days of the week, called *pola rauma* ('pola circuits'), *pola* means a life style. For those who cover a *rauma* of four *polas* in four different localities on four different days of the week, a *pola* is one local *pola*, not one market among many. This is explicit when they say that their occupation is "*pola raume yanawa*" (Lit: travelling the *pola* circuit). At another level, for the owners or managers of *pola* lands, *pola* is a one full day operation at a specific site they own; they call this segment of action a *pola*. According to the landowner of the Kottawa Pola site, he 'conducts four *polas* a month on his land [Kottawa Pola site]'. By *pola*, I refer to a particular time and place. As I acknowledge the agency of the actors, I also acknowledge and engage the definitions of *pola* actors from their perspectives; when used in other meanings, it will be so mentioned.

Transforming and Familiarizing Pola

Under the Rajapaksa regime (2005-2015), in Sri Lanka, the national government attempted to modernize its capital, Colombo. Many urban *polas* were modernized as a part of this effort. In practice, this means building a structure and relocating *pola* vendors in it. These are massive structures with bright blue roofs covering almost the whole site which resembles no part of previous *pola* structure/s. (Figures 1.1 and 1.2)



Figure 1.1: Self made *pola* structures at Malabe

The vendors struggle to fit into government-provided giant alien structures that are spatially, economically or culturally not compatible with *pola* activities. They thus try to re-familiarize, or turn back these modernized markets into the *polas* with which they are comfortable. My emotional attachment to the *pola* as a place and an experience, (elaborated below) encouraged me to study it. Especially at a time when it is misread by many planners, developers and policy makers and is in danger of ‘extinction’ (this view was changed by what I

learned from *pola*, see last paragraph of the conclusion) due to the external efforts to create, improve, and/or save *polas*, especially by the state.

In his in-depth analysis of the urban life in Jakarta, AbdouMaliq Simone (2014) highlights a gap that indicates the depth and the breadth of pitfalls in contemporary urban knowledge and planning practice. The practitioners fail to incorporate (or even acknowledge) the life journeys of ordinary people in their development agenda or in the urban commons they make for the public. Simone (2014: 264) sums up the dilemma:



Figure 1.2: State provided *pola* structure at Maharagama

Municipal institutions, for the most part, do not understand what residents [= ordinary people who make *polas*, in my case] are up to or are even threatened by their actions, and these endeavors are now too easily seen as signs of complicity with the dismantling of public goods and social value. [sic]

The vendors at Maharagama redeveloped *pola* provided me the first insights into the significance of the *pola* and the gravity of the issue of replacing them with modernized market structures.

This structure hardly looks like a *pola*; this is more like a ‘hangar’ in which they assemble airplanes in developed countries. The roof is so high and cannot protect us from the rain or sun. We cannot fit all our merchandise into the smaller spaces allocated for us. The stalls we had built earlier were different in size and matched the space requirements of each vendor.

My income is [now] reduced to one sixth of the original because of this new arrangement. The success of *pola* vendors depends largely on the movement of customers and the strategic location of the vendors; also the circles of vendors and customers. The new system assigns space by a numbering system that does not respect any of these and I have lost my customers, friends and my income.

They do not let us raise the display tables; in ‘normal’ [people-made] *polas* the display tables/area is always 1-2ft higher than the ground. This is a very [culturally] sensitive issue. Most of vendors are male and most of the customers are female. The females do not like to bend from the waist in front of men if they are wearing blouses that might show their breast when they bend. [Due to hot sweaty climate, most women wear such blouses with such possibility.]

Pola is a place where customers use both their hands and eyes to measure the quality of what they buy, and when they cannot do that they do not buy. The designers do not understand why we want to raise the tables. This is very embarrassing for both women customers and vendors; their relationships and trust are broken because of this new rule [insensitivity of the designers and managers]. You know why they [planners] designed the new structure this way? They [the politicians] want to conduct political meetings and other functions in this space on non-*pola* days...

The complaints, critiques and insights of the users highlighted social, cultural, functional, economic and structural mismatches and/or gaps between the provided (abstract) market space and the lived space of the “actual” *pola*. Technically the planners are promoting a structure for multi-use across time that undermines or overlooks the compatibility of the designed space for the primary use which is *pola*; this is self defeating in many ways. The story about the ‘airplane

hangar’ made me realize how Asian space makers import Western structural/materialistic symbols and images of modernism in lieu of the concept of modernism.

An unbelievable amount of resources and time is invested into development projects that produce spaces that are not even remotely grounded as spaces derived through ordinary people’s relationship with each other. Here I refer to the fact that space is a social relation (Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991). In their attempts to fit into provided abstract spaces, ordinary people transform the same into lived space (Holston 1989; Perera 2016). The lived spaces are, for the most part, far from the (abstract) space imagined by the providers. Unfortunately, this resourcefulness and the creativity of ordinary people to transform given spaces into useful spaces are perceived as vandalism, unruliness and/or, more commonly, backwardness, i.e., not-knowing how to become modern or to use modern spaces provided for them. In reality, these adaptive users are the ones who do not let the abstract spaces go waste. As a discourse, the middle class and the planners fail to see the alternative ways of becoming modern, like the ways in which the *pola* attains modernity from within. (I will discuss this further in chapter 3 and 4).

My Own Experience (Inspired from within)

My interest in *pola* is rooted in my curiosity to observe how the ordinary people in Sri Lanka produce space for and through their everyday practices. My previous research on *handiya* (Perera and Liyanage 2016) demonstrates that these spaces and places are the sites of key social infrastructure that links political, economic, cultural and educational aspects of everyday life. As a kid from a rural area and an adult who lived in Colombo for over a decade I have observed the centrality of locally-produced spaces like the *pola*, the *handiya* and *para* in regard to the way they provide everyday needs (both material and social) of the people.

Along with all locally-produced spaces such as the *handiya* (key social centers that make up larger urban and territorial spaces in Sri Lanka), *kade* (the local grocery store), *paras* (street/road), transportation stations and religious places that played multiple roles in my upbringing, *pola* fulfilled the materialistic (goods and services) and the social needs (to meet, observe local people, friends and outsiders, a public space to learn social skills and gather everyday knowledge) which helps to survive and thrive in the same/similar cultural context for the rest of the life. Unfortunately none of the attempts that intended to ‘develop’ *pola* saw it as a space or a social institution that fulfills intangible (social/ personality/ spiritual) needs of the users. *Pola* was understood and changed into something that redistributes nothing but economic goods. In larger picture, this whole phenomenon is a result of the materialism that drives and governs mainstream Sri Lankan mind in 21st century.

For me, the *handiya* and *pola* have provided education and the social experience of being among strangers. *Pola* was the first public space (other than the road sides) in which I actually took part. I saw all kinds of people interacting with others, buying, selling, negotiating, bargaining, catching up with personal stories, eating, joking, teasing, drinking, reading newspapers, and fighting. My father was friends with some vendors and I knew exactly where they sat even though I did not understand the *pola* layout. I looked forward to receiving weekly treats which I got from them when I visited the *pola*. It was a thrill to hear their stories; I learned their names and some new words that were not used at home. They enjoyed asking me the names of produce they were selling; that is how I learned most of the names of vegetables and spices. It was a weekly activity that taught me to remember colors, textures, names and nutritional value of food items and some tools that Sri Lankans use at home.

Being a girl-child, the most important part of my cultural education was achieved through accompanying my mother as she engaged in her daily tasks. I remember walking to *pola* with my mother and helping her carry whatever she bought. Polgampola, where we lived then had a weekly *pola* on Mondays right at the main *handiya* of the locality. This whole trip was fun and I looked forward to it every week. *Pola* is where I was first exposed to a crowd, the place where I saw different kinds of people (felt then like all kinds of people) interacting with each other. The interactions include buying, selling, negotiating, bargaining, catching up with personal stories, eating, joking, teasing, drinking, reading newspapers, and fighting. Some of the sellers were friends of my father and I knew exactly where they sat even though I did not understand the whole *pola* layout or its organization.

I looked forward to receiving weekly treats that I got from them when I visited the *pola*. It was also thrilling to hear their stories. I learned their names and some new words I do not hear at home. They enjoyed asking me the names of the products they were selling and that is how I learned most of the names of vegetables and spices. It was a weekly task that taught me to remember colors, textures, names and purposes of food items and some appliances the Sri Lankans use at home.

I was a stubborn child who did not like learning from my own parents, but did not resist these strangers' attempts to teach me 'life', maybe because I did not know that it was a learning exercise. It was more like a game that I looked forward to playing. I used to call these *pola* users my friends. My mother used the *pola* as a place to show me certain items that we do not eat at home because of health concerns and other reasons; this new knowledge was a great source that

fed my curiosity. There were some neighbors who sometimes grouped up with my mother to go to *pola*; some met us at the *pola*.

I remember some '*pola* moments' where we crossed paths with some people known to my family, but never visited us. They normally asked my mother: "Are you the wife of Nimal of Palligoda "(my father's nickname and village)? "This must be your daughter?" They usually introduced themselves after such statement: "I am the uncle/ aunt of your husband's so and so." After such quick accidental meetings at *pola*, my mother never forgot to share stories that she had heard about these people, on our way home. Sometimes, she showed me the houses of these people or of their relatives. That way she expanded both my social relations map and the cognitive map of the area that I lived in. All that was a part of and a result of the *pola* experience. Technically, *pola* itself did not provide the above experience, but that was the significance of *pola* to our lives.

Pola was complementary to the village grocery shop from which we bought our daily needs like bread. For instance, *pola* had sweets and other snacks that were not available at the village grocery shop. *Pola* was a part of my mother's everyday life. Throughout the week, she listed everything she wanted to buy from the *pola*, as these items were a lot cheaper at the *pola* than at the grocery store, and waited until Monday to get into action. She also believed that the items sold at the *pola* (especially vegetables, fruits and homemade sweets) are fresh and healthy compared to the village grocery store. I remember her saying, " Lal's (name of the shop owner) wife buy things from *pola* and let them rot in the shop throughout the week, yet the prices are much higher than *pola* prices. I do not go there for things I generally buy from *pola* unless it is an emergency like when I have unexpected visitors". This was true for all my aunts and other

housewives I knew. *Pola* was their preferred source of cheaper, healthier and more authentic foods and the weekly reason, opportunity and site for socialization.

It was later that I realized that my childhood experience of *pola* was gendered. My father visits the village grocery shop almost every evening; it was a must for his socialization. His socialization was different from my mother's and it included alcohol and cigarettes; these were both available at the grocery store, although alcohol was never sold openly. I did not know that alcohol is also available at the *pola* (or around it) until I started working at a *pola* for this thesis-research. It was not important for me or my mother to know about the availability of alcohol and cigarettes, because we did not use or approve them. Our experience, socialization and entertainment were different and the *pola* definitely accommodated these though providing what we wanted and by not explicitly selling what we did not approve. It was one of the most women- and child-friendly places in the neighborhood. Later, I learned that for some vendors it is hard to keep working for a whole day without tasting a sip during work. At Kottawa (where I did most of my field work) the real alcohol-involved party begins when *pola* is almost over and majority of the female vendors and all the customers have left the *pola* site. Thus, *pola* accommodated gendered social and market experiences for vendors and customers of all sexes without excluding the other.

After I started schooling, I missed the opportunity to visit the Monday *pola* but started to see other aspects of the same. When I return from school I saw the extremely poor (leftover) people of the area going through the leftovers of *pola* stalls to see whether there are any usable vegetables left. Most of these were wives of the *nattamis* (porters) who worked at the *pola*. I do not remember having beggars in the area we lived (in the 1990s beggars were only found in

towns, I believe) but “scavenging” was evidence for the existence poor families and represented how they managed not to beg for living in public.

Pola was their source of fresh food supply too, but it was not through the formal economic exchange of goods. When I asked my father (who has once worked as a textile vendor in a *pola*), he told me that some left overs of fresh items are purposefully left for poor people, largely because of the beliefs in *pin* (good karma) by the majority –Buddhist vendors and also because paying the transport costs for the small amount of leftovers is uneconomical. Thus *pola* was not merely a site or an institution for economic exchange. There was a belief system and values behind its operations and these included religious and cultural beliefs.

My first active engagement in *pola* –as an individual-- was during a fundraising event in 1995 for a film screening we organized as the children’s club of the area. Polgampola *pola* and *handiya* were our main sites for fund collection. On that particular Monday we went to *pola* with our specially designed piggy banks and began explaining our mission to sellers, buyers and others who visited Polgampola *handiya*. *Pola* day is the busiest day at the *handiya* and we did fundraising for the whole day. That was the first time I observed the full day of a *pola* and also be at *pola* without close adult supervision.

None of the kids from the team went missing nor met with accidents; our parents knew that the *pola* community will take care of us. We did not have to go home for lunch as the *pola* people spoiled us with frequent treats. By the end of the day we had raised more money than the target through small contributions from thousands of *pola* users. Also, we made new friends and supporters for the event, the villagers were more informed on the activities of the children’s club and we even met potential members for the children’s club. Though I did not understand the

value of the social aspect of this day then, this is still one of the best memories from my childhood!

As it did to me, the *pola* shapes the everyday life of ordinary Sri Lankans who uses the *pola* in various capacities. In turn, *pola* is also shaped by these people's interventions. *Pola* is a node in the flow (circulation) of food, domestic goods, money and information (news, ideas and trends) among ordinary people, in both urban and rural areas of the country. It is also a weekly gathering, meeting, and/or walking place for many in the area. In other words it is one of the key places and/or local centers where people meet and socialize in addition to buying and selling.

Issue/s

Almost every *pola* I came across during my lifetime as a Sri Lankan, and especially during this research, have survived, for over a century by adapting and adjusting space and functions to face challenging internal and external conditions. These were subjected to everyday self-modifications during each day of its survival, to fit the changing environment and needs. Yet the success or the 'modernization within' and way in which it is produced and/or negotiated is overlooked and marginalized by both politicians and planning practitioners. They see the *pola* as a traditional institution and space that is stuck in the past and needing to be saved through state intervention. (See Chapter Two)

During one of my visits to the Urban Development Authority (UDA) of Sri Lanka, I was told about the success of fourteen *polas* that were being built recently. I also read the draft of the fund request from the national treasury to modify/rebuild fifty-four more *polas* in next budget year. According to my knowledge this is the largest direct intervention into the development of *pola*

that the central government has ever committed. (The ways in which provincial and local governments have involved in pol activities are discussed acronym in Chapter Two.)I was impressed by the fact that the planners have finally figured out the importance of developing truly local spaces/institutions like the *pola*. As a researcher on lived spaces, I was more interested to see how people respond and adjust to this newly restructured and provided *pola*.

Let us turn to Maharagama Pola redevelopment project, one of the fourteen *polas* that were replaced with UDA designed structures. The planners at national level and local level were proud of the structure and the new space arrangement Anura Kothalawala, a pumpkin seller at Maharagama Pola, shared his views on the re-developed *pola* which questioned the views of the providers:

Development is not about beautification. If development is taking place, each person involved has to be uplifted to a situation where he [or she] believes to be a better than the original. They[the government] gave me a place in the new ‘developed’ *pola* but in the first week alone, my income went down to 1/6th of my regular income. I am afraid that I will lose the vehicle which my mother and I use to collect and transport vegetables and fruits to the *pola* because I can no longer afford to pay the monthly mortgage installment. I might have to leave the *pola* and think about a whole new livelihood. They [the government] need to know that things like *pola* cannot be planned from air conditioned rooms in Colombo [capital city]; one has to come here and ask us. It [profit] all depend on the things you cannot see from outside...

The *pola*-vendors were already –within a few months-- losing their only income because of the same government intervention that was aimed to ‘develop’ people like Kotalawala. There seems a gross misunderstanding of what can be done to facilitate, uplift, change and/or support the *pola*. The roots of this gap or confusion go back to the basic question of ‘what is *pola*’. I believe that the planners have totally overlooked the need of grounded knowledge that gives planners better access to highly sensitive local institutions and spaces like the *pola*. As a result the

resources, money, energy and time spent on developing the *pola* go into waste, at the cost of disabling another people's space that was functioning perfectly by ordinary people.

More than half of the *pola* users I interviewed (briefly) at redeveloped *polas* at Delkanda and Maharagama agreed that there was a mismatch in the way the *pola* was understood by the planners and re-designed by the designers. It is hard to say to what degree the planners and designers have read the *pola* as an institution when there are fundamental gaps in the way they saw its physicality. The structural or functional understanding of *pola* is not culturally grounded; As mentioned before, one vendor directly suggested that the new *pola* structure is like an airplane hangar used to assemble parts of airplanes in developed [Western] countries. He said that it does not look, feel or work the way 'our' typical local *pola* structure.

The *pola* has thus been de-familiarized. It seems to have lost its vitality and the occupants are discouraged by the scale of the adaptation they have to make in order to make it work again. They will have to cut through a thick wall of restrictions, regulations and unfamiliarity that came with this new structure. It is therefore not the time to simply study people's response to the structures provided; there is a clear need to study the *pola* as built, developed and operated by people before the island wide restructuring plan completely erases the *pola* that worked perfectly fine and empowered people like Kotalawala. Hence, I structured my research to understand the people's *pola*, before this massive wave of alien urban design and development projects completely wipe it out from the contemporary urban experience.

Moreover, the above conflict in space making in Sri Lanka is rooted in, among others, the lack of studies on Sri Lankan social spaces, Importation of legislation from the West, borrowing planning theory and frameworks from the West to understand the local space (further discussed

in Chapter Two). In this thesis, I will try to understand the *pola*, a small part of the puzzle, particularly as to how it is produced, reproduced and transformed, and through which social and cultural processes.

My questions are: How is *pola* built and operated? What is meaning and the role of a *pola* in a given community without, or before government intervention? What forces keep it operating sustainably for decades? What mechanisms within the *pola* empowers many generations of occupants to rely on it as an economically and socially productive unit?

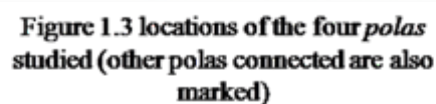
The Project

The aim of the research project is to investigate the spatial makeup of the *pola* as a social institution, paying special attention to social, spatial and institutional arrangements and everyday practices that constantly transform its contents and meaning. The goal is to examine the *pola* before it disappears or transforms into a different social space, weakened by the unbearable government control and unquestioned restructuring.

It is not a question of extinction of *pola* or the need of historic preservation that this thesis argues for. It aims to highlight the strength of *pola*-people's agency that has given the resilience to the *pola* as an institution for more than a century. Irrespective of the ways in which the state intervenes, the *pola* communities will cope, resist, negotiate and eventually subvert the space and institution that the government attempts to create. As the *pola* cannot ignore the state, the outcome will be influenced by state interventions, but *pola* will never fully become the 'dreamy modern market' which is based on middle class values (which the state represents). This research

For the purpose of understanding both creation and negotiation of *pola*, particularly the time and place specific needs of different *polas*, I will study in more detail a few *polas* from the same area that represent different stages and/or forms of development and processes. In addition the researcher briefly analyzes short-term negotiations made by *pola* occupants in a situation where the whole spatial, social and institutional make-up of *pola* is restructured and directly controlled by the government. The latter is also employed as a crosscheck of the former to and/or enrichment of it.

Malabe was the other *pola* I studied, completely out of the necessity to understand the ways in which people govern their own *polas*. Malabe Pola



takes place twice a week and is much larger than Kottawa Pola. More importantly it has a '*pola samithiya*' (*pola* society), a community organization that manages, governs and maintains social, organizational and physical structures of Malabe Pola. The research was enriched by the opportunity to live close to a restructured pola (Delkanda) and another that was being restructured (Maharagama). The two former *polas* (Kottawa and Malabe) are created and managed by people and are of different scales and have different schedules and roles.

The study is more diverse. Kottawa Pola is the primary case study carried out with the object of understanding the *pola* as how it is developed and operated by people with no government or outside intervention. Malabe Pola helps corroborate the findings at Kottawa and understand some aspects that I may have missed from Kottawa, mainly because it is a bit smaller. Maharagama newly built *pola* is briefly studied to understand how *pola* occupants respond when they are displaced in an unfamiliar space. This aspect of the study helps me question incompatible observations and enrich others. (Figure 1.3)

Kottawa Pola

Kottawa Pola, the main case study, is located in Kottawa a town located on Colombo-Avissawella (A4) highway, roughly about 18 kilometers slightly east of south of Colombo (Figure 1.4). It is located at the Angaharuwada Pola Handiya which is named after the *pola*, about 1km away from the center of Kottawa town, usually called Kottawa Handiya. For most locals, this is walking distance; yet, some take a bus –one bus stop-- or a taxi to reach *pola*. Kottawa Pola is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Located at an intersection, Kottawa Pola attracts customers from four directions. Customers, vendors and distributors reach the *pola* along all four main roads that meet at the *handiya* using public transport including busses, taxis and tuk-tuks; private vehicles (lorries, vans, cars and motorized and bicycles) and on foot. The *pola* site connects the two roads: Kottawa- Athurugiriya road and



Figure 1.4: Location of Kottawa Pola

Malabe- kottawa road (Figure 1.5); sitting in between, it the *pola* has two entrances and connects the two roads. The path that connects the two entrances is the main aisle along which the stalls are lined. This path/ aisle is divided into 3-4 paths at the (physical) center of the *pola*.

Kottawa Pola was created, expanded, transformed and operated by ordinary people. Although it began on the same site, it was free then. Now the descendants of the owners of the *pola* land receive a ground rent. The rent is collected from each vendor on every *pola* day. i.e., Tuesday.



Figure 1.5: Aerial view of Kottawa Pola

The landlords are interested in an investment that can bring better returns, but no plans as such. Also there was no government intervention in the past and no intervention is planned for the future.

Kottawa Pola is a small size *pola* consisting of nearly 120 sit-in vendors/merchants, 30 mobile vendors and support service providers. Pola which the locals also call the Angaharuwada Pola (Tuesday *pola*) operates on Tuesdays of each week; sales begin around 7:30 am and ends around 9:30pm. Setting up *pola* for business and closing makes its working day longer than 17 hours: from about 5 am to 10.30 pm.

The term ‘around’ is deliberately used as the vendors do not observe times in a strict (Western) manner; times mentioned are approximate. (It is the quality of flexibility that allows them to plan their schedules responding to changing conditions in their personal lives and at *pola*, rather than observing a universal time. As the *pola* is a gathering of many actors, the majority shows up on or before 7:30 am and the general start time remains the same. *Pola* has a general schedule that is predictable and does not disappoint the customers. But it leaves time and space for individuals to arrange their individual routines. This flexibility allows *pola* to sustain as an institution run by many; a group that respect individual freedom but value the sources and means of livelihood such as customers by respecting them. It is a goodwill developed over decades rather than a routine forced by an outsider or authority.

This *pola* has a history that runs back to the 1920s when it began as a wholesale *pola*. Currently, it is completely a retail *pola*, largely relying on the agricultural produce that comes from various areas of the country, through one central conduit: Manning wholesale market in Colombo Fort. Yet there are exceptions, discussed in Chapter Three.

The reason for selecting Kottawa Pola for this study –after my initial liking for a familiar type *pola*-- is because it was solely built, operated, managed, structured and restructured by people. I mainly studied the spatial and temporal frameworks that are internal and external to the *pola*, the everyday processes and actors behind these. The purpose is to understand what makes, what changes and what keeps the *pola* running. However, I do not aim to understand everything about the *polas* in general through the specifics of Kottawa Pola although much of what I learn maybe applicable to other *polas*.

Many aspects of Kottawa Pola are time and space specific. In Kottawa, what began in the 1920s as a wholesale *pola* which provided a market for few agricultural products cultivated in then rural area is currently a urban-retail *pola* which receives perishable food products from all over the country and some non-perishable goods such as clothing, films and plastic utensils to a highly urbanized new customer base. What began as a truly local operation is now responding to national and global trends in production, distribution and consumption and helps ground and re-shape these through the local application and/or experimentation. See Chapter Three for the detailed study.

Methodology

I first surveyed existing literature on markets and Sri Lankan social spaces, especially the previous studies on *pola* and informal markets in Third World and Asia, to learn about these. It was accompanied with the study of the production of space in general and contemporary people's spaces in Sri Lanka and Asia. These studies both revealed the existing knowledge about *pola* and highlighted the gaps in the knowledge of *pola* in specific and locally-produced Sri Lankan social spaces in general.

Literature also helped me build a framework for the study. My aim was to see the *pola* from within, as an insider. Literatures on social production of spaces and the production of lived spaces were highly useful. I also fine tuned concepts such as resistance, subaltern, agency, informality, globalization, modernity and everyday politics to get an insider view of *pola*. While it provided an intellectual context, the study also enabled me to see intellectual gaps and develop an analytical framework.



Figure 1.6: participating in Kottawa and Malabe *polas*

In the field, I employed observations, participant observations, interviews and surveys as my main tools. I worked in two *polas*: Kottawa Pola and Malabe Pola. I worked at Kottawa Pola as a fulltime vendor assistant for three months and on short-term bases in other *polas*. I worked and researched at Kottawa Pola from 6am to 8pm on every Tuesday; towards the end I managed to stay a few days until 10-10:30pm to observe the closing up of the *pola*. I soon realized that since Tuesday Pola only meets once a week I need another mechanism to hang-out with some *pola* vendors on other days; this exposed me to how *pola* circuits work.

Yet even after working at these *polas* for a substantial time, I cannot claim that I was able to become a total insider. Apart from the rumor that caused some vendors and workers at the *pola* to identify me as the daughter of the middle aged man I worked for, I always stood out among the rest of the vendors especially because of my gender and age; there were no other female vendor or supporter of my age. If there was anyone of my age group, they were male; all female vendors at the *pola* were above 35 years of age.

This exposure made it possible for me to approach actors within the *pola* as individuals and not as a part of a group or ‘public’ as planners and statisticians would see. I was able to give them time to familiarize to my presence and my curiosity that led to discussions. I was conscious of my vantage point as an ethnographer and my framework and focus which eventually decided what kind of ethnography I was doing (Perera and Tang 2013). I tried to adapt to the vantage point of an insider of *pola*, who does not see *pola* only from above, outside or a powerful position than its other occupants.

I used ethnographic methods to document my findings. I also used a camera and voice recorder from time to time. In addition to participation in the *pola*, I also interviewed several educators and experts who were highly conversant with the *pola*, including social researchers, political thinkers, urban activist, architects and students who are also customers of some *pola* in their personal life. Analyzing data and writing the narrative are key parts of the research. I was highly conscious of the fact that any thought formulation and writing involves assumptions and biases. I have tried to avoid the biases that I was able to catch.

The Outcome

In a broader sense, this thesis represents a subject that I wanted to learn about. It continued my research on locally-produced Sri Lankan social spaces which I began with my undergraduate thesis (Liyanage 2012). The basic reason for undertaking these projects are the lack of knowledge among scholars and practitioners about locally-produced Sri Lankan social spaces and the inability of planning to ground itself in community, causing a big gap between planning and the communities it serves in Sri Lanka. The issue became more evident in the thesis process.

I also learned that *pola* is a modern institution that incorporates older practices and new ones from even other countries. Its linkages are global reaching to China and America and the products are modern including electronic goods. It is also not a single place, but a network in which the vendors go to several *polas*.

As any research would require, I had an earlier version of the above methodology to begin with. The basic object of research methodology was to empathize with *pola* actors. This required me to be flexible and change the methods as required. My research journey of discovering, learning, changing and using tactics is very much a part of the project. The most crucial impact of the methodology is that it transformed with my own views; it was a learning-by-doing exercise that enabled me to fine tune field methods.

I learned to dress in ways that did not provoke unnecessary attention or reaction. As I have learned in my previous research, when the researcher is obvious to the community, the latter changes by converting the researcher into an exotic object; this changes the whole behavior of the community. Hence, I tried not to be too obvious. In meshing with the *pola* community, I

learned not to be offended by *pola* people's language which is not totally familiar to me. I tried to keep my personal judgments about the subject and their opinions to myself as I joined their everyday conversations.

This learning also required me to unlearn my middle-class perceptions. I was not very comfortable to go and work at *pola* as many middle-class people think the *pola* people are uneducated, indecent, disrespectful and considered thieves (because poor). Although it took time, I was able to stay there until the *pola* closed at night. I took courage from my own experience to overcome the middle-class stereotypes.

I learned the rhythm of the *pola* and its life, and used appropriate moments and opportunities to learn. The *pola* people used my trips around the *pola* to send messages and goods to their friends who are located in other parts of the *pola*. The tea maker used me as a 'delivery girl' to send tea to my boss. Nimal's neighbor Dhanapala who does not like the tea made by the tea lady frequently sent me to a nearby store. These gave me the opportunity and a reason to hang out at various locations and observe the *pola* and also to talk, get-to-know, and interview a variety of vendors.

Moreover, the vendors do not like people just standing, so I help at the stalls. They like it and give me enough time to talk. Do not like people standing; so I helped them at the stalls. They connect very well and gave me much needed time. I also learned that vendors become a bit free when it rains. Rain was one of my best friends. I used to run to various stalls when it rains. In short, I kept learning the tactic of tapping into the resources available at the moment to get the immediate task done and to learn more about the *pola* through the unexpected opportunities and experiences the *pola* community provided me.

The Format

In chapter Two, I describe and analyze the literature that helped me to investigate, analyze and develop an understanding of the *pola*. The chapter consists of previous studies on *pola* in Sri Lanka, on informal markets in third world, and on social production of space and contemporary people's spaces in Sri Lanka and Asia. These studies both reveal what is already known about *pola* and the gaps and conflicts in understanding. It is also the place where I build a basic framework for the analysis of *polas* and "better understanding" of them. Literature on concepts like resistance, subaltern, agency, informality, globalization, modernity and everyday politics are discussed and employed in developing this conceptual background.

Chapter Three is the key chapter of this thesis: It presents my findings on Kottawa Pola. The chapter presents structures, processes and actors involved in the creation, operation and revision of *pola* space. Beginning from the *polas'* physical layout and daily rhythm with specific information on characters and individual journeys the chapter elaborates the journey of *pola* as a social institution. The chapter paves the way to present the findings of my investigation of Malabe and Maharagama *polas* in following chapter.

Chapter Four discusses the advancement of the *pola* into a modern urban institution and a space that is strengthened from within to negotiate with external impositions made by the state and capital. Focusing on its linkages beyond the site which had historically defined the *pola*, the chapter addresses how today's *pola* is a translocality that exceeds the boundaries of the site. It also demonstrates how the *pola* develops a grounded and localized modernity for itself through the negotiation with tradition and Westernized modernity.

Chapter Five concludes the research by highlighting the arguments and the core narrative of people's inside-out process of creating, operating and negotiating *pola*. It will contrast this construction with the governments' outside-in understanding and the transforming of *pola* into a *podu velendapola*; it raises questions about the ethical validity of outside interventions into local social spaces like *pola* without critical ground-up understanding of the same. Most importantly, it opens up the possibility of trusting people to be in the driver's seat and build, operate, upgrade and own their own social spaces while the government facilitates their journey from side, behind or below.

CHAPTER TWO

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE, FRAMEWORK, AND METHODOLOGY

Pola has received much scholarly attention, compared to other social spaces in Sri Lanka, such as *handiya*. In contrast to *handiya* which received no scholarly attention until it was critiqued by Perera (2009b) and studied by Liyanage in 2012 (Perera and Liyanage 2016), first available scholarly work on *pola* dates back to 1977. A foreign anthropologist, Deborah Winslow Jackson (1977) studied the *pola* system in North Western Sri Lanka, specifically looking at a set of *pola* circuits consisting of 86 *polas*. Her study recognizes the *pola* is a 20th century development, even though it is commonly considered a traditional institution (see Bandara 1988). I will first briefly introduce a few studies as a point of departure and then critically delve into them in the following sections.

In 1980, Agrarian Research and Training Institute (ARTI) of Sri Lanka studied the *polas* in Kurunegala District, at the request of Ministry of Plan Implementation, for the regional rural market development project funded by Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (UNFAO). The study highlights *pola* as an important link in the agricultural marketing system in Sri Lanka and therefore recommends that it should receive more attention from policy makers. (Senanayake 1980) It provided the basis for a national development plan for rural markets.

Acknowledging the lived aspects of the *pola*, beyond viewing as an abstract rural or urban market, Winslow in 1981, describes a competition between the *polas* at Kudapola (a retail *pola* with 200 vendors) and Polagama (located in a town with 300 wholesalers and retail vendors),

and how the villagers of the pottery making village compared the transportation costs of going to a larger but distant Polagama Pola and the closer but smaller Kudapola Pola.

In 1988, the ARTI studied and documented *polas* in Kalutara district at the request and with the financial support of Ministry of Youth Affairs. This study estimates that there were more than 400 *polas* in Sri Lanka at the time and highlights that, as a market system with market functions of different sorts according to socio-economic pattern of the local area. (Bandara 1988)

Pola was again mentioned in the same year by Stirrat (1988), a foreign researcher in economics and anthropology, in his book on fishermen in Sri Lanka. He suggests that in rural areas most produce is sold through periodic markets known as *polas*, to boutiques, to itinerant or other traders who have set up long term relationships with the producers.

A study done by the Department of Geography at the University of Jayawardenapura, to explore the urban-rural interface in Sri Lanka, suggests a growth in the number of *polas* to 517 in 1997 which was clearly impacted by large resettlement programs like the Mahaweli Project. (Karunanayake 2003). This study also highlights pola as a 'rural phenomenon sited in urban locations'. They also suggest that *polas* effectively integrate the rural and urban sectors through a two-way flow of commodities (Ibid).

Examining the gender aspects of *pola*, Azmi (2008) demonstrates the vulnerability of women traders at Thambuttegama Pola. She exposes multiple constraints and the smaller room for maneuvering available to women vendors in comparison to their male counterparts at *pola*. Much of the studies are both confusing and misleading.

Confusing translations and misleading definitions

Pola does not have a specific English term or a definition with which all scholars and practitioners agree; it is translated and defined in both descriptive ways and through comparison to markets studied in other countries.

Jackson (1977) calls it a ‘periodic market’, justified by the characteristics the *pola* shares with periodic markets elsewhere in the world. Here she refers to the recurring nature of the market activity, gathering of buyers and sellers and the purpose of buying and selling. These conditions are true to *pola* but they are not sufficient to differentiate the *pola* in Sri Lanka from similar spaces, events or markets.

Senanayake (1980) agrees with Jackson and uses the term ‘periodic market’ with the adjective ‘rural’. Furthermore he says that the periodic rural markets are commonly known as fairs, another interjection. (Senanayake 1980) According to Merriam-Webster dictionary (2016) a fair is (i) a gathering of buyers and sellers at a particular place and time for trade, (ii) a competitive exhibition usually with accompanying entertainment and amusement, (iii) a sale of assorted articles usually for a charitable purpose. Although the *pola* is not a place of charity, it is not clear to which definition Senanayake connects the *pola*. Borrowing a word from a different cultural and geographical context in which it has multiple meanings does not do much justice to scholars and practitioners who want to understand the *pola* in Sri Lanka for what it is.

Bandara (1988) defines *pola* (in Sinhala) as a ‘process defined by transactions that take place when a group of buyers and sellers, gathers at a specific place, on a specific date and within a specific time period, with the intension of buying and selling’. Stirrat (1988) uses both ‘weekly

fair’ and ‘periodic market’ interchangeably to refer to *pola* as a place connected to the fishery community he studied. Rupasena (2003) stresses the adjective, ‘rural’, by describing *pola* as a significant feature in the socio-economic landscape of rural Sri Lanka; he translates *pola* as rural periodic markets. Azmi (2008) takes this definition beyond the economic function of *pola* by saying, “*pola* in rural Sri Lanka, not only serves as an economic center, but also as cultural, social and recreational center.” Yet, the intention of her research is not to understand how *pola* plays these multiple roles.

Common pitfalls of studying *pola*

The origin Myth: A nationalist narrative

The origin of *pola* in Sri Lanka is highly debated; at the beginning of the research on *pola*, Jackson provides some useful insights into the historic development (expansion) of *pola*. She very clearly recognizes the contemporariness of *polas*:

Although frequently thought of as a ‘traditional’ institution, in some way associated with a barter and primitive economy, these markets, in Sri Lanka, are very much a 20th century development - and a continuing one. In recent years a new *pola* has been opened somewhere in the island every few months. (Jackson 1977: 56)

Elsewhere in the same publication, she writes that although the oldest evidence she found belongs to the nineteenth century, she believes that markets in Sri Lanka [not necessarily *polas*] existed at least from the seventeenth century; the nineteenth century evidence comes from administrative reports during the British rule. According to her, these too do not mention a *pola* system as such, but refers to ‘town market places’ where [rural] producers came irregularly to sell goods to urban residents. These can be the markets Stirrat (1988) mentions as the markets that were operated by the Local Board, the precursor of the Town Council, and later Urban Council. Based on her research and the experience of a few markets during her years in Sri

Lanka, (during the second half of the 1970s) it seems safe to assume that *pola* is a twentieth century development. The *polas* I studied too agree with the timeline proposed by Jackson. (See Chapters 3 & 4) However, this argument about the origin of *pola* has given birth to an interesting dialogue between her work and that of Sri Lankan researchers who later built on Jackson's work.

Ratnayake Bandara (1988) argues that the *pola* existed even during ancient times, when the kings ruled from Anuradhapura (477 - 1017 BC). He refers to two famous rock inscriptions found in Thonigala and Badulla and a historical text called *Deepawamsa*. According to *Deepawamsa*, there were four public markets at the four main gates of the sacred city of Anuradhapura. Thonigala rock inscription mentions a market or a shop that existed in the fourth century that was called "*Kalahumanaka*". More importantly, Badulu rock inscription describes some rules regarding a market named "*Hopitigama*" that existed in the tenth century.

While these indicate that there were markets and urban settings during Anuradhapura period, he hardly demonstrates that these were *polas*. Bandara (1988) argues that the original Sinhala term for market in was '*padhiya*' and this *padhiya* was administered by a chief officer appointed by the king; he in turn paid the king a proportion of tax money he collected from vendors. The officer provided structures and these were allocated for different types of produce and selling of products outside the market was prohibited. Also, the buying of produce before the producer reached the market was prohibited. The market was the only place of transaction

However, Bandara (1988) does not explain how and why this *padhiya* system did or did not convert into a *pola*, or any other connection between *padhiya* and *pola*. Without directly connecting *pola* and *padhiya*, he signals that it is difficult to believe that this market pattern between fourth and tenth century completely vanished. Without any evidence, he blames the

South Indian invasions for weakening the *padhiya* system. He thus constructs 2,500 years of continuing history of the market system. The power assumed by the researcher to claim that anything that may have functioned as a market was a '*pola*' shows the arrogance out of which meaning of *pola* is overlooked and subjected to this historic institution.

As in the continuity of institutions and ideas from the Greek times, in European history, Sri Lankan historians and politicians have also attempted to connect the Sri Lankan present to its own classical period at Anuradhapura. This study does not have any credible evidence to connect the *pola* to this ancient market, *padhiya*. Nonetheless, due to lack of evidence, Bandara (1988) does not oppose Jackson's (1977) claim that the *pola* originated in the 20th century.

Yet he does not leave it unquestioned:

The historic information reveals that there was a market system that was unique to the island which persisted from ancient times. There is no evidence to claim that these systems gave birth to the *pola* system. But, the majority of the characteristics of current *polas* are similar to those ancient market systems. Hence, I cannot say that there is no connection between the origin of current *polas* and ancient market system. (Bandara, 1988: 8, Author's translation)

The above continuity cannot be explained through anything other than the Sinhala nationalist discourse that claims to root modern phenomena in classical periods implying the present as a time of re-establishing the greatness of the historic Lanka. This has been a trend since Prime-Minister J.R. Jayawardena (1977-1978; President 1978-1989) claimed of a 2,500 years of continuous history; before that, Prime Minister S.W.R.D Bandaranaike also connected Sri Lanka with the 2,500 anniversary of the Buddha's birth. The past President Mahinda Rajapaksa too laid claims to a history that connects to the Anuradhapura period. In my view, the above history of

connecting the *pola* to the Anuradhapura period is more of a belief than an argument that is supported by Sinhala-nationalist claims.

Convincingly, Bandara's (1988) narrative passes the responsibility of weakening the ancient market system to south Indian invaders, yet without any clear evidence of demolishing the market system. This type of arguments, especially those implying the Tamils, the largest ethnic minority of Sri Lanka, whose homeland is considered southern India, only strengthens the patriotic nationalist discourse that seems to suppress the weight given to the ethical concerns of research. I do not relate Bandara to this, but am simply highlighting the only possible cause for this argument.

My friends, relatives, and I too grew up in Sri Lanka within this worldview and, in the absence of an adequate explanation, it is quite easy for such explanations to slip in. In the area studied by Jackson (1977), the *polas* existed by 1915. By 1940 many new *polas* were established geographically between the old ones, and some old ones were transformed into major wholesale *polas*, places where the farmers bring produce in bulk and the brokers and vendors sell those to various buyers at the site itself and at various markets in Sri Lanka. Kottawa Pola is not from the same area Jackson studied, but its growth largely matches her explanation.

Borrowed frameworks: partial, partisan and problematic theories

Most studies on *pola* rely largely on definitions, theories and frameworks borrowed from places outside of Sri Lanka; while there is some use to 'comparison' as a method of producing new knowledge, this is not much helped by borrowing definitions made elsewhere to understand a locally built space that is specific to Sri Lanka which also varies in character in different regions

of the country. These definitions and frameworks, make the researchers blind to subtle differences between structures, meanings and processes at individual markets.

A periodic market is a regularly recurring, usually weekly or bi weekly, gathering of people and merchandise for the purpose of buying and selling. In Sri Lanka, where periodic markets are known as '*polas*,' the open ground on which the market meets is usually provided with either temporary thatched or permanent cement shelters. A well, a latrine, and pasturage for animals are other common facilities; storage sheds for goods between *polas* are rare and arrangements for grading of produce are almost non-existent. (Jackson 1977: 58)

Even though Jackson accurately describes the *pola*, she fails to explain how it is built or operated as seen from the site. As an anthropologist she gets very close to the *pola*, but approaches from an external vantage point. Due to this reference, going beyond the observation of what is there and their strengths, she highlights the things such as storage facilities that do not exist in *polas*. Since there were no studies on *pola* prior to her study, understandably she has borrowed images and mental reference points on periodic markets from other countries such as Guatemala, China and India which are mentioned in the study.

As much as these reference points provide her with a comparison and insights, they also become barriers for her to see the local *pola*, as seen by the locals. She observes absences, overlooking many presences. For instance, there is no inquiry into who builds and maintains the structures and other spaces through which *pola* is produced and conducted, yet the absence of storage is duly noticed. The mystery behind no storage, which is also important, is explained in Chapter Three.

More damagingly, Jackson then borrows a famous theory from economic geography: Central Place Theory that originated in Germany to understand the spatial distribution of *polas* in the central and northwestern Sri Lanka. She thus sees the *polas*, through Walter Christaller's 'central place theory,' as a 'market system,' and the distribution of *polas* as the organization of market

locations. This certainly creates a gap between the theory and ground conditions in which the theory is privileged. (Perera 2005) She concludes that there is a lack of more intermediate level markets and the lack of centrality of the existing intermediate markets is a failure of the Sri Lankan periodic market system. In my view, this unrealistic expectation is based on a theory, and in a culturally, economically and climatically different context, resulted in losing the ground on which her research was rooted.

Similarly, Sri Lankan scholars who studied the *pola* after Jackson, also rely on the same frameworks such as central place theory. This leads to precarious conclusions that are not grounded: Karunanayake (2003) claims that “rural periodic markets (*pola* in local parlance) constitute a lower order central place whose functioning is marked by periodicity”. He further borrows theories from South Africa (Hodder 1967) and from Middle American Indian economies (Nash 1971), from Senegal (Geist 1990) and Nigeria (Braun et al. 1998). As much as they opened the eyes of the researchers (for better or worse) they were also blinded from seeing the *pola* for what it is. For example, Gormsen (1985) who was followed by Bandara (1988) has largely influenced the way in which *pola* is viewed within the regional socio-economic context. Gormsen (1983) suggests that;

Although it is certainly true that in third world countries the markets are very important elemental components in the spatial articulation of economic and social activities, their changing role for wholesale and retail trade, in rural and urban environments, and for different strata of the population should be evaluated in the context of the general stage of development in any particular country or region.

This result in Karunanayake (2003) to recommend that there is much to be done in order to purposefully relate periodic market systems to regional development planning. Being blinded by this large picture, they fail to see the grounded mechanisms through which *pola* has reached this status that, in Karunanayake’s (2003) words, cannot be overestimated in terms of its

contribution to regional development on its own. The researchers suggest that the added problem is the absence of ‘proper management’ in *pola* system.

Looking from outside or above

Even though, all the studies by Sri Lankans on *pola* were done after Jackson’s study, they completely overlook her illustrious example of providing a detailed account to what *pola* is and how it operates. In short, they failed to understand the *pola* closely, instead go by prevalent stereotypes that are produced through outsider values such as ‘*pola* people are indecent, uneducated, or poor in business management skills’. These ‘outside-in’ images are mostly shared by the middle class, the capital and the agents of the state.

This is evident in some recommendations made by the researchers who studied the *pola*. For example, Bandara (1988) suggests the educating of new groups of inexperienced vendors, as they join the *pola*, while the *pola* grows amazingly through a model of apprenticeship that provided ‘learning on the job and learning by doing’ which has worked for over a century. The researcher’s approach devalues the strategies and tactics on which the *pola* thrives and overlooks the complexity of its makeup, while forcing it to become a place that is comfortable for outsiders who value formal education and training.

The researchers on *pola* including Jackson (1977) and Azmi (2008) seem to bypass the very creators of the *pola*: the vendors and customers (See Chapter Three). According to Jackson, (1977: 58, Emphasis mine) the *pola* is “**provided** with either temporary... shelters.” Making a closer observation, Senanayake (1980: 74, Emphasis mine) asserts that “the temporary sheds **erected by owners** (whether they be private individuals [landowners] or local government institutions) are grossly inadequate and also space available is not sufficient.” For Bandara

(1988: 3, Emphasis mine) the “physical **provisions available for** the *polas* he studied are not adequate; even when available they lack certain aspects and are poorly maintained.” Azmi (2008) argues that “the **creation** of a facilitating environment is necessary to increase the livelihood options of the women in the [pola] area.”

The pattern I observe in these studies is that there is hardly any investigation or acknowledgement of the role of actual operators of the *pola*. The vendors, support service providers and the customers who create and reproduce the *pola* on a daily basis are either overlooked or misinterpreted as beneficiaries of structures, spaces and facilities that are provided by agencies such as the state. At the same time, most researchers seem to believe in the existence of a ‘benevolent provider’ who is superior to the people who operate the *pola*. As a result of these unrealistic premises, none of the researchers were able to understand the actors, processes and structures behind this thriving institution.

Most of the studies give recommendations on how to ‘develop’ the *pola*, as if they are addressing the imaginary benevolent provider who expects ideas from an outsider (researcher) whose education, wisdom and social status is much better than stereotypical *pola* actors. No researcher explicitly names or talks about this provider or her/his whereabouts yet discuss the issues and/or suggest improvements to what is provided for people. In this ‘provider-recipient’ structure the provider can be the state or any representative of political and/or economic power such as the landowner of the *polas* that are located on privately owned sites.

Yet, most likely, the analysts refer to the state. But in reality, there is no legal background for the local, regional or national level government to intervene in the *polas* in Sri Lanka especially as the land and structures of most *polas* in Sri Lanka belong to private owners. According to the Municipal Planning Officer at Maharagama, in a crisis situation, the state can provide help to the

pola community (vendors) on the basis of sympathy, but not on a legal basis. For the national government to intervene, the site of *pola* has to be declared as a land with national importance in terms of urban development.

When the owner evicted the *pola* vendors at Delkanda in 2012, the Maharagama Municipal Council found a site from Kotte Municipal Council area and the Urban Development Authority built a structure. Hence, the premises on which the research is built is therefore very far from the ground; the researchers seem to have very little understanding of the actual operations of *polas* including their tenure status. In this, the largest and the most important group of actors who conduct *polas* are disregarded as mere recipients or passive powerless beneficiaries of the *pola*.

It seems that both the ‘point of departure’ and the ‘vantage point’ from which the research designs were made and conducted have had enormous impact on what was found and not found about the *pola*. There is so much negativity, disappointment and arrogance based on middle class values the researchers carry with them to the research field. These outsider values are embedded in the language they use to describe *pola* which breeds negative stereotypes about the *pola* in to the minds of the donors, policy makers and other readers. I failed to ignore the dominance of terms like “lack,” “inadequate,” “temporary,” “insufficient,” “poor,” “problems” and “deficiency” when explaining the nature of the *pola* throughout the research that was done to “understand” *pola*. In the conclusion of a recent study of the *pola*, Rupasena (2003) provides a list of ‘problems’ faced by the *pola* and strengthens the conclusions given in all previous studies.

There are many problems confronting periodic markets (sic). Some problems have to do with the inadequacy of infrastructure facilities such as electricity, toilets, water supply, parking spaces etc. these facilities are found to be deficient in many periodic markets. ... a close look at the layout of periodic markets shows that they are poorly designed. At some markets the location of stalls and selling booths are rather haphazard and prevent the advantages to be reaped by the producers, vendors and consumers ...

Through these lenses, *pola* cannot be seen as anything but a bundle of problems that the *pola* actors will never be able to solve on their own, only because the issues are framed through someone else's worldview.

Sold intentions: Statist research

Most of the researches mentioned above are baseline studies conducted before investing in some projects. The projects were guided by practitioners who justified physical and/or structural interventions into *pola*. Evidently, most of the research projects on *pola* were contracts given by public or private sector development agencies. The research was driven by the intention of these agencies to improve the *polas* or the rural/agricultural economy as a whole. Per my observations, the researchers were biased towards this requirement and were inclined to highlight a gap between the *polas* that exist and what would be a better version that the client could create. This is somewhat similar to research conducted to find evidence for and justify a decision, as opposed to making a decision based on facts and evidence. This concerns the ethics of social research and threatens the credibility of research.

The perceptions and values that block the researcher from connecting with actual *pola* creators and users is the statism in research. According to this view, for research to be valid, it must be useful for the state to make decisions, including policies. Conversely, without ever investigating, the researchers assume that the *polas* come under the purview of the state, they are provided and it is the responsibility of state to provide whatever is lacking in them. They adopt the same mentality when selecting whom to interview. At the extreme of this, Senanayake (1980) interviewed the Assistant Government Agents (AGAs), heads of schools, Officers In-Charge (OICs) of police stations, to decide how the local government should acquire all rural markets.

The values and concepts through which the researchers and these middle class outsiders to *pola* build knowledge are similar and they arrive at the ‘universal solution’ that the *pola* should be controlled and/or facilitated by the state. There was no room with easy access for ordinary people to participate in any *pola* study. So far most researchers of *pola* are blind to the need for self-reflection.

Economic function is overrated:

All research attempts made to understand the *pola*, views and frames it as a market. This is one reason why it has grabbed so much scholarly attention as an economic institution that can be used to achieve economic growth. Rupasena (2003) highlights five functions in relation to the role of *pola* in regional development. (1) Serve as outlets of farm produce (2) Distribute food and other consumer items at reasonable prices in the rural hinterland (3) Provide employment both direct and indirect to sections of the rural and urban population (4) Disseminate [economic] information and (5) Generate income to local authorities.

The extant research had hardly shown any appreciation for social, cultural and other qualitative aspects of the *pola*. The non-economic contributions of the *pola* can range from setting up public socialization spaces to the use of organic material to reduce the harm to the environment. The economic primacy undermines many areas into which research can be expanded, both developing a broader to understanding of the *pola* and learning from people’s development processes.

Practice: framework of the planning and design interventions

The *pola* has been developed as a central activity of urban centers, long before the local government system of Sri Lanka was established and certainly before the local governments understood *polas*' social and economic impact on the larger social fabric. When the *pola* became an essential component in Sri Lankan towns the local governments assumed some control and many charges a fee from the *pola* community for the self-assumed duty of managing local *polas*. Jackson (1977) bears some evidence to this early local government intervention into *pola* which runs back to the 1970's.

Whether run privately or publicly, *polas* are seen invariably as money making operations. Formerly as now, they were started for that purpose [money making] and the village committees' major motivation in taking them over is to control directly a lucrative source of revenue. It may be a sign of the increasing importance of these markets that they have become so profitable that village committees are willing to undertake responsibility for their administration. (Jackson 1977: 63)

Stirrat (1988) provides further evidence to support this point by elaborating on how other forms of market was also shifted to public control during the same period. While the above quote explains the intentions of the state intervention into the *pola*, the below description found in the same publication explains some parameters through which such interventions were justified. Provision of more permanent structures and direct controlling of weighing seems to be the ways in which the state control over *pola* took off.

Informants usually report that there is little change in marketing conditions when a *pola* moves from private to public control. However, in a few instances I was told that take-overs had resulted in less short-weighing by sellers, presumably because of increased police inspection. In the larger markets near the coast the public authorities have erected elaborate cement block facilities in attempts to increase *pola* size. It is not entirely clear that they have been successful in achieving this end. (Jackson 1977: 63)

The regional government and particular ministries of the national government (i.e.: Ministry of Rural Economy or Agriculture) indirectly intervened into the *pola* system during the late-1990's and early-2000's, following this phase of local governments' direct intervention into *pola* management and operation.

Upgrading the local agricultural marketing system was one among the several priorities to develop rural sector of Sri Lanka adopted in the development forum held in Colombo in 2002. Most of the existing agricultural marketing infrastructures are in poor condition in rural areas. The government felt the need to rehabilitate and improve the existing systems. Under this, Dedicated Economic Centers (DEC) (or modern agricultural wholesale markets) were set up in some parts of the country. (Azmi 2008: 14)

Azmi (2008) later explains how the state interventions were reflected on the uneven ground of *pola*.

Direct access to DEC's is a dream for many poor Solama [the *pola* area she studied] women, due to its location and the male dominant marketing channels. According to interviewed women, private and state marketing channels [too] buy the products mainly from male household heads in the village.

The state interventions have further sharpened or even created a more uneven socio-economic landscape in *pola* communities. However, most of these interventions were supported by research, particularly by baseline studies, that always supported the state intervention that was assumed prior to research. In a way, the agents of the state and the researchers hired by them viewed *pola* in the same manner and their positions were equally statist. There is no surprise in their agreement, yet the surprise is in the now historical fact that these research attempts never rejected any outsider intervention planned.

The period 2013 to 2015 was the first instance in which the central government directly intervened into *polas*. This is also the largest (by scale) state intervention into individual *polas*. Yet the state did not seek any support from scholars or experts before intervention. Firstly, the period of above literature in which *pola* was studied by scholars and the period in which rebuilding individual *polas* was a leading trend of national development misses each other. Secondly, research and actual interventions have not affected each other in any direct or indirect ways that are constructive. In the long run, while research was done to justify policy interventions, the policy interventions were not informed by any inquisitive explorations done on *pola*. The planners and builders of most recent modern *polas* have hardly read previous studies, nor are any recent studies conducted on *polas*.

Practice: Planner's justification

The recent national-level state interventions into the *pola* were not guided or followed by any scholarly study of the *polas*. In order to learn about the intentions, framework and inspiration behind the intervention I had to rely on interviews, project briefs and official letters/ memos that were circulated during the project period.

The only document that explains the planner's justification of the request of treasury funds to continue the nationwide *pola* restructuring projects is a 'cabinet paper.' It is essentially a project brief prepared by the program planner and the directors of the UDA to present to the parliament.

Here's a sample of its language and reference (or) to research:

It has been reported that the weekly fairs operated in main urban areas as well as in regional town areas are immensely benefitted [beneficial?] for the farmers as well [as] wide range of public. After restoration of peace in the country [meaning the end of the separatist war], there is a significant increase in the agricultural and other indigenous

products in rural areas.... Redevelopment [of] existing weekly fairs in regional towns are the most practical solution to facilitate rural economy.

The purpose of this justification of the *pola* redevelopment is to request the central government for LKR 3000 millions (USD 21 millions) for the development of modern urban ‘sathi [weekly] pola’ and related community facilities in townships (as promised by No. 42.1 of 2015 budget speech). (Project Management Unit- PMU 2015) This is a huge amount of money compared to the country’s economy, yet the justification is not even researched.

The lack of responsibility and the level of confusion over development related concepts and intentions embedded in these official statements are enormous; the planners claim that ‘it has been reported’ about the beneficial nature of *pola*, without mentioning where. They imagine an increase in indigenous products in the post war context without any statistical evidence; even if there is such growth there was no qualitative research done to collect empirical evidence see whether these are the products that are circulated through *pola* system. According to my research only a minor and depleting portion of *pola* sales falls into the category of indigenous products. (See Chapter Three)

The statements justified the redevelopment of rural *polas* while the budget item is promised for the development of ‘modern urban weekly *polas*. The following statement from the same report further clarifies such confusions and the lack of clarity in the planners’ minds about the difference between the actual *pola* and this modern institution they are promoting.

The existing weekly fairs [*sathi pola*] in regional town centers are carried out in dilapidated structures and are not up to the standard and do not have adequate space for the increasing number of traders. ... the UDA with the help of three forces [army, navy and the air force] has designed long lasting modern steel structures to be set up in selected town centers to establish weekly fairs with adequate parking and sanitary facilities. (Project Management Unit 2015)

I argue that the perception of the *pola* as ‘dilapidated’ is constructed through the middle class values described in the previous section. It is simply the inability of planners and other outsiders to see the *pola* through the eyes of insiders such as the vendors and *pola*-goers whose values are different from the middle class values the planners carry.

When interviewed, the head of the project at UDA claimed that his team accommodated a diverse range of needs of the *pola* in restructuring it. The example he gave was how the UDA separated fish and meat sellers from fruit and vegetable sellers because they needed extra facilities like water, ice and drains. This fits very well within the understanding through separation in Western knowledge production. So mechanical, but the planners were confident that they knew everything they need to know about the *pola* so that their intervention without prior studies will not cause any harm. This gap is further discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Framework:

As discussed before, Jackson (1977) neither assumes that the reader already knows the *pola*, nor overlooks the nature of the *pola*. Except when she borrowed the central place theory to understand *pola* system, she addresses *pola* from a less intimidating standpoint, neither looking down nor othering the *pola* actors. Almost all the studies, carried out by Sri Lankan scholars after Jackson, assumed that their audience knows the *pola* and there is nothing new to be found if studied from basics or from the bottom.

My research locates the viewer/ reader and researcher inside *pola* among the *pola* actors. On the one hand, my methodology is based on the viewpoints of De Certeau (1984), Hamdi (2004), Simone (2014) and largely inspired by the gap Perera (2009b) highlights:

In the professional world, people's everyday language and spaces have not entered policies, plans, planning reports, and management discourses. In Sri Lanka, people define space in terms of *handi* (junctions), *malu*, and *adavi*, in India they use *chowks*; in Kathmandu space is organized around *durbars*, *hitis*, and *chautaras*, whereas *longtangs* are important in Shanghai. The activities and practices associated with these "publics" have hardly entered those urban perceptions employed in professional discourses whose explicit objective is service to the "public good." In making simple translations of these words into their technical languages, the practitioners transform and, in most cases, marginalize the spaces and activities familiar to the user.

On the other hand, although we live in the "Asian Century" in which Asia is expected to be the center of gravity of the global political-economy. Yet according to the literature on its cities, Asia's spatial transformation is curiously following the West. This is the point of departure for the authors of *Transforming Asian cities* who bring the inadequacy of conceptualizations on contemporary spatial transformation in Asia to scholarly attention (Perera and Tang 2013). They argue that there is a lack of understanding of the changing urban spatiality in Asia. Yet, this is the story of 'space making' by powerful actors such as the state, upper classes and international space regulators such as UN Habitat and donors. What is not sufficiently acknowledged are 'the space-making processes driven by the majority of actors in Asia: the 'ordinary people' of Asia' (Perera and Tang 2013).

My own experience of living in an American city for three years and working in a government institution engaged in urban planning made me realize that the ordinary people in America are born into a regulated space. The norm is that, 'nothing begins until, we, clear the zoning classification and other legal requirements.' This does not mean that people do not create or

negotiate space in the West, but not very widespread as in other areas. My experience of living in India, and Malaysia, and Sri Lanka suggests that people are born into a space that is largely theirs. It is up to them to live in it.

People and space existed long before the state or rules came in to their lives and the sense of authorship of people in space-making is much stronger in South Asia. (See Perera and Pradhan 2016) In Asia, ordinary people consider ‘state and its rules on space’ to be more of a barrier to their relationship with the space. This idea is well illustrated through the case studies in Perera’s (2016) recent book: *people’s spaces*. Its closing lines provide more depth and validity to these processes:

...people produce most of their spaces with little interference from the authorities and the powerful, below their radar. ... Space is produced by people, later negotiated by the authorities and the dominant actors. This is not new; it is an older and more widespread practice than the production of abstract space [the spaces perceived and provided by the power actors]. (Perera 2016: 235)

AbdouMalik Simone (2004) explains the same class or group of people who produces the space

Perera (2016) talks about in his book *‘For the City yet to Come’* as below:

They [space making ordinary people] believe there is something beyond the bad politics, inadequate infrastructure, and sometimes [it is the] feverish sense of entrepreneurship that drives their everyday urban lives. It is something not said because there is no language to say it, something not remembered because memory is viewed as dangerous.

This unspoken, unnoticed ‘feverish’ entrepreneurship is the main process that drives the growth and survival of the *pola*. And the space and identity making processes that rely on this everyday entrepreneurship is the process I associate with the actors of the *pola* when I analyze their everyday processes especially in Chapter 3 and 4.

To bring the non-monetary capital that gets most of the jobs done at the *pola*, into focus, I follow the researchers Michal Lyons and Simon Snoxell (2005) and their take on social capital and its role in two Nairobi markets. With inspirations taken from their research, I was able to see deliberately created social capital and the by-products of sociability; the different ways in which men and women develop social capital and how some grow beyond the support system of informal social capital into formal and institutionalized support systems. Lyons and Snoxell (2005) identify these as village social capital and market social capital. However, these categories are not exclusive of each other. (See chapter 3)

Bringing this discussion to his home country, Perera (2016) shows the lack of scholarly attention on locally-grounded social spaces as a key weakness of the spatial discourse in Sri Lanka. His previous critiques on the planning law and spatial regulations in Sri Lanka elaborate how the colonial administration imported planning laws from Britain and how the native people's relationships, negotiations and the interpretations of space were seen as problematic through this borrowed intellectual frame. (Perera 2005)

Issues concerning the contemporary practice of these colonial rules and their modern interpretations are well understood by other scholars as well. In her article "When Rationality is Unreasonable: Planning Theory in Sri Lanka," Barbara Rahder (2009) points out how planning theories and frameworks produced in the West might not reveal the values, interests and beliefs embedded in the social context of the place where they are applied. As clearly argued by these leading scholars of social space in Sri Lanka, while planning is highly contextual the knowledge and practice of planning is not yet grounded in the socio-economic and environmental context of Sri Lanka. As an extension of the same gap, the contemporary planning knowledge and practice

both lack the local understanding of social spaces and the processes in which they are made. *Pola* is a prime example.

The leading scholar in social space of Sri Lanka, Nihal Perera, has studied this gap for over two decades and has addressed both gaps in theory and practice, its roots, complications and circumstances, and most importantly the ways in which ordinary people approach, resist and negotiate this gap. Throughout his phenomenal discussion on the processes of space making by ordinary people on everyday basis, Perera (2016) stresses the need to acknowledge, engage and critique the spaces created by the ordinary people, not only because ‘ordinary people’ are still the largest producers of space but also because the variety of spaces are created by people can never be matched by what is produced by power actors. He demonstrates that these space-making processes begin in the cracks, margins and interstices of the formal society. In his most recent work he finds spaces like *handiya* in Sri Lanka to be central to space making processes and demonstrates how the so-called power actors are compelled to negotiate with the spaces that are made by people (Perera and Liyanage 2016).

Filling a gap in the local application of the knowledge, I studied and documented the *handiya* in Sri Lanka as a space that is produced and reproduced by people (Liyanage 2012). The subsequent collaborative project I did with Perera, publishing a book chapter on it (Perera and Liyanage 2016), revealed that *handiya* is a powerful people’s space in which the power actors seek accommodation for their activities and functions, transforming aspects this lived space into abstract spaces. This process was unheard of in literature.

Handiya is not a space that grows in a crack within the dominant spatial system; it is created, modified, failed and succeeded right in the center people’s everyday lives defying every

mainstream attempt to ‘develop’ it. I see the *pola* in a similar vein. It is a social space that is too powerful, resilient and meaningful to be brushed away by the so-called modernization and/or globalization of urban space. The *pola* has survived numerous local government interventions and is now negotiating the displacements, modification and structural adjustments imposed by the central government. As a planner, it is frustrating to see people viewing planning interventions as barriers to overcome instead of bridges to make them happy and developed. Yet, the exploration of ‘why’ can help planners to participate better in people’s processes that are larger dynamic and longer than the official plans.

Based on Simone (2014) and Scott (1998) I try to focus on multiple ways in which the urbanity or urban modern life can be weaved through the planned and at the same time unplanned city. Scott’s (1998: 98) position helped to view the problematic nature inherent to the government’s approach to understand and ‘develop’ the *pola*:

The clarity of the high-modernist optic is due to its resolute singularity. Its simplifying fiction is that, for any activity or process that comes under its scrutiny, there is only one thing going on. In the scientific forest there is only commercial wood being grown; in the planned city there is only the efficient movement of goods and people;

I keep my focus on peoples’ processes in the *pola* to see the multitude of ways in which they achieve their modern aspirations. (See the Transtemporality section in Chapter Four).

I also focus on the social and spatial structures and everyday practices that produce and re-produce the *pola* on a daily basis. My framework is largely shaped by the discourse on ‘social production of space,’ (Lefebvre, 1991) but focusing on how people with less power use their agency to negotiate and produce space. The leading scholars like AbdouMaliq Simone (2014) and Nihal Perera (2016) allowed me to see this from the vantage point of the producers of these

lived spaces by pushing me beyond the theories of agricultural, rural or informal economy that have explained the *pola* in the past.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRAFT OF A SOCIAL SPACE: THE STUDY OF KOTTAWA POLA

As discussed in Chapter Two, the *pola* has been largely viewed from outside. Scholars, professionals, and politicians see it as a moribund or declining market defined by its economic functions. According to this view, the *pola* is struggling to survive in a modern society with super markets, a quicker and broader distribution of vegetables and groceries, and the desire of people for a “Modern” living. Some scholars frame the *pola* as informality and/or simply marginalize it as a chaotic and/or undeveloped mess. For others, the survival of *pola* depends on outside intervention in order to modernize it, and this role belongs to the state. The last government (2010-2015) which assumed this position undertook to develop 68 *polas*, and completed 14. (Project Management Unit 2015) Its solution was to build new physical structures. The improved *polas* are now massive metal roofs on columns which people call airplane hangars. They have hardly improved the *pola* as an institution.

Turning the lens around, in this thesis, I opt to approach the *pola* empathically from within. The *pola* is a historic institution, at least hundred years old (Jackson 1977), that has survived various social, economic, political, environmental, and technological changes to become what it is today. It is certainly much different today than in the past. A hundred years ago, it had been closer to a farmers market where (rural) produce was sold (to urbanites) when available, but today it is a “modern” institution which also sells DVDs of latest Hollywood movies along with other everyday supplies. It is also an urban public space that people visit on *pola* days for a variety of

activities including buying vegetables and fruits, but not solely for that. While the *polas* continue to respond to external changes, in their own ways, they also influence contemporary cities in Sri Lanka. For example, the main grocery chain, Cargills Food City has a few elements that mimic the *pola* culture. In this chapter, I will explore the Kottawa Pola from inside. I will combine the views of vendors, helpers, visitors and customers to my own experiences and interactions as I worked, shopped and integrated myself into the *polas*.

Organization

Physically, the Kottawa Angaharuwada Pola is largely a collection of stalls and/or small shop structures organized in rows facing each other creating paths between them for customers and service providers. As opposed to the Modernist city built out of freestanding individual buildings (Holston 1989), the *pola* is more like a medieval European town with small winding streets created by the organization of buildings. While it is mainly a two rows of stalls with one path for the most part, at the densest point it becomes four paths. All this occurs in a 247' X 264' space.

Kottawa Angaharuwada Pola has its own spatial and temporal pattern. It also takes part in and contributes to the production of a 'locally developed network of spaces arranged for periodical redistribution of goods and information.' It operates on a specific site (further discussed below) on Tuesday mornings. Given the range of mainly fresh produce sold at the *pola*, the particular order in which customers buy these, how various actors interact, and how these are facilitated by the physical environment, the Angaharuwada Pola seems a genius institution and place that goes beyond the fixity of time, space, flows generally associated with a formal market. Focusing on Kottawa Pola, I will leave the larger trans-temporal and trans-local aspects that relate to other times and places for the next chapter,

Location, the Immediate Context, the Entrances

The location is crucial for any activity; even more so for the *pola* that depends on surrounding communities and managed with a low profit margin. Kottawa Pola is located at the Angaharuwada Pola Handiya; here the *handiya* is named after the *pola*. Although these are different institutions/ social spaces, the *pola* is associated with the *handiya*.

Handiya is the social center and transportation node that organizes neighborhoods to villages across urban and rural areas of Sri Lanka (Perera and Liyanage 2016). While most neighborhoods and villages are organized around a *handiya*, towns, cities, and regions are organized around many *handiyas* with different specializations for example, bread and salt; the networks of *handiyas* provide the structure for larger cities and regions. When visiting a place in Sri Lanka, people usually find the nearby *handiya* and get directions to the specific location from there. *Handiya* is the most intense confluence of social activities of the area and *pola* is usually, although not always, one of the activities that makes the *handiya*, as in Moratumulla and Mavi-ela. For a broader discussion of *handiya*, see Perera and Liyanage (2016).

My first visit to Kottawa Pola was for this project. As a stranger, I first arrived at Kottawa town center, aka Kottawa Handiya. It is located 18 km from Colombo, on the A4 road that connects Colombo and Avissawella. I then asked for directions to the Angaharuwada Pola. I was advised to walk along Athurugiriya road until I find a *handiya*. Even though there are few road intersections between Kottawa Handiya and the Pola Handiya, these are not developed into *handiyas* the social space. Angaharuwada Pola Handiya is the most intense.

The Pola Handiya is where the Kottawa–Malabe road branches off from the Kottawa–Athurugiriya road. It is about one km from Kottawa Handiya. For most locals, this is walking distance, although some take a bus, for this one bus-stop distance. Some others also take three-wheel taxis.

The *pola* sits diagonally on the Northwest quadrant of the Pola Handiya, connecting the two roads. As seen in figure 3.1, the two roads are connected with a slightly curved path defined by vending stalls built on either side. The main path divides into four parallel paths in the middle, the main axis being the outer curve. All these paths have vending stalls on either side; at varying densities and dimensions. While many of the stalls are attached, there are many gaps between them.

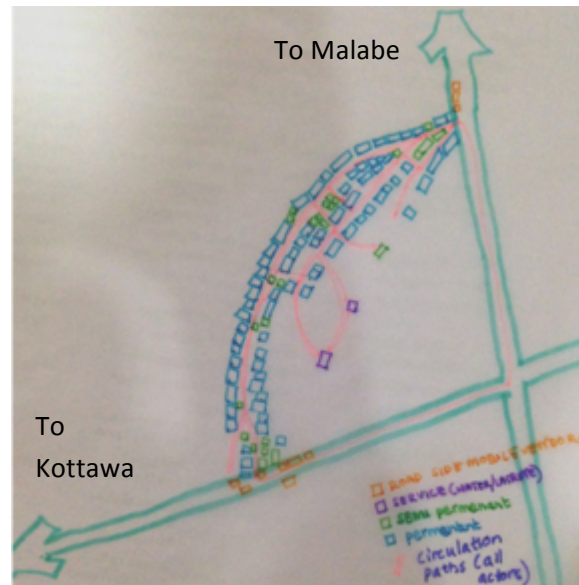
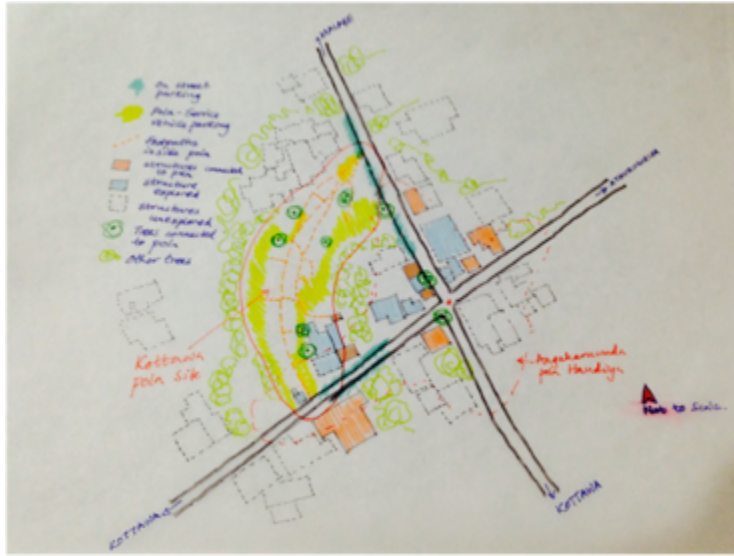


Figure 3.1: Layout of Kottawa Pola

Angaruwada Pola Handiya, i.e., the immediate context of the *pola* (Figure 3.2), consists of a few tea shops (local restaurants), grocery shops, major bus stop, a retail shop for building materials, a fish stall and some individual houses. There are special elements such as a bench under a large tree with a teashop that makes this area much more than just a place to buy and sell. I will use two directions of flow, from outside to inside and vice versa, to discuss how most of these elements are connected to the *pola*.

The *pola* has two entrances, i.e., from the two roads. There are stories that hint at the historical existence of a grand entrance marked by a gate with two large columns that held two lion statues



road, but not as permanent as the structures built on ground inside the *pola*. Although largely



Figure 3.4: Semi permanent structures near entrance (South)

permanent, there are many new entrepreneurs. They too do not pay ground rent.

These mobile structures are diverse; they include rear extensions of vans and small trucks, a wooden board

carefully balanced on a few plastic stools (Figure 3.4) few wooden boxes on which a wooden or a metal sheet is fixed (most of these boards are covered by a plastic sheet and the goods are arranged on it in an eye-pleasing manner) and simply some boxes of different sizes, some used for displaying merchandise and one for the shop keeper to sit.

Few female vendors very creatively set the big baskets (in which they carry their merchandise) upside down and cover the flat bottom of the baskets (now top) as a display table (Figure 3.5). In this, as many others, they carry the whole store to the *pola*. This creativity with structures takes different forms as they move to the middle of the *pola*.



Figure 3.5: A carrying basket turned into a table

The Core

As one walks past the entrance areas, the vending structures become more permanent. The structures are built on the ground and are made up of a mixture of materials. According to formal (planning) classification, most are built out of temporary material

such as cadjan, coconut fronds and hay, but also include semi-permanent material such as wood and corrugated metal sheets and permanent material such as cement and bricks. For planners and authorities who base their evaluations on the durability of materials, the *pola* is a temporary place. (Figure 3.6)



Figure 3.6: Some permanent structures

For vendors, it is permanent. The permanency for them lies in space and the institution and not in material. Despite the classification, considering the length of time the *pola* has lasted, i.e, since the 1920s, the *pola* is as permanent as any other institution. Some of the physical structures also have been there for more than half a century. The structures in the *pola* are also processes where vendors keep changing the materials, their arrangement and fixtures along with functional and contextual changes. What is permanent is this continuous reproduction of the institution and its spaces. Nonetheless, the authorities' classification of the *pola* as temporary justified their urge to redevelop the *pola*. (See Chapter Two)

Site and layout

The *pola* is well organized from the vendor's and service providers' side; most customers feel the same. At individual stalls, organized in lines on either side of the paths, merchandise is displayed on the front side, as close as possible to the customers. Some vendors simply sit on the ground, without physical structures or stalls. Their spaces too respect the arrangement of other



Figure 3.7: Awnings at Kottawa Pola

stalls in rows or locate at the intersections of paths providing diversity to the organization of stalls. At the most intense area, there are four aisles each with stalls facing the path.

As the roofs of the stalls project over onto the path, the customers get to walk under some shade. The awnings that are in front of most stalls are mostly plastic sheets tied to the roof of the stall who owns the sheet, but in many places these are tied to the stall in front using two ropes, thus creating a roof over the path. These awnings have a meaningful color code: The

shades in front of stalls that sell green items such as vegetables, green leaves, fruits or betel leaves are green. The stalls that sell reddish or brownish items such as fish, onions, spices or potatoes usually have red-colored awnings. Dried fish stalls use both blue and red for their awning. (Figure 3.7)

When sunlight filters through these awnings the visual expression of the merchandize enhances; the filter provides an appropriate tint for the items making them look fresh and of high quality. Most customers are fully aware of this and enjoy it as a part of the *pola* architecture and atmosphere. Some vendors who do not care for the colorful sheets use a stronger more durable black awning. This has caused some controversy between adjacent shop owners. I have overheard few disagreements on how such black material make the adjacent shops too dark and

less attractive. Hence, most owners of black awnings usually limit the use of their awning material for rainy days. Some shop owners do not use awnings at all and some cannot afford them.

The counters and/or display boards are mostly raised off the ground, sometimes up to the thigh level, (Figure 3.8) both enabling the customers to get a closer look at the merchandize and providing an enclosed space for the shopkeeper. Most stalls do not have walls. If one has, the



Figure 3.8: stalls and display tables

walls are made of wood/ metal or plastic sheets and have an entrance from the front or back, or two entrances from both sides.

The front end of the counter is for displaying items; the middle, which has a better reach for the shopkeeper is for weighing and packing sold items. Behind where the shopkeeper stands is for storing excess stock and to keep his personal items such as food and water. The space under the counter is also used for storage. Two key items in each shop is a wooden box that has compartments for bills (money notes) and coins and a digital or manual balance to weigh what is sold.

The size of the stall is defined by the space that is absolutely necessary to display the items, the availability of space based on the needs of the adjacent vendors and the power balance between

them. Hence, every inch of space is carefully used for some purpose and there is absolutely no extra room for any extra activity. From an anthropometric standpoint, the size of a shop seems to be determined by the circle of reach of a fully-grown man. If and when the size is greater than that, perhaps due to the range of products, there will be two vendors (owner and an assistant) who take care of the shop. This is not the only reason why there is more than one person in one stall. (See apprenticeship model)

At the center of the *pola*, there is an unexpected break in the main path where it splits into four parallel smaller paths. At this point the back row of stalls can be seen. The parallel paths are very close: about ten feet apart. Along the main path, the stalls get comparatively larger with counters of low height, or no counters with items displayed on the floor. The level on which the goods are laid is a bit higher than the ground. None of the products directly contact the ground which would make them unclean. A slightly elevated ground is first covered by grass; the grass is then covered by a few layers of plastic, jute sacks, linen and/or varieties of thick paper.

The stalls are carefully laid every morning (i.e., on Tuesdays): the ground is swept, grass is trimmed (if grown), surface water drainage channels are cleaned, and then some wooden logs or stones are kept along the edges of the display area to avoid the products from rolling over to low ground (i.e., to the path on which customers walk). Then the first layer (usually a water resistant sheet) is carefully laid to cover the whole area before the finishing layers are laid. (Figure 3.9)



Figure 3.9: preparing and covering the ground, display on the floor

These layers serve purposes: First they avoid products from touching the ground making sure that they are clean. Second, they provide a soft bed for fresh and fragile products like vegetables (especially items like tomatoes) which can get damaged by directly unloading from boxes or sacks on to a hard surface. Third, is the uppermost layer which provides the right color combination and aesthetics for an attractive display. A thick grass bed best serves the second purpose and is therefore treasured by the vendors and vegetable handlers such as porters. The last trick of an attractive display is washing the produce before display (except for items such as onions that go bad if washed). The vendor keeps spraying water on these produce throughout the day.

This practice is also related to cleanliness, particularly as it is understood in Sri Lanka. I interviewed both vendors and customers about this concern and they all submit to following ideas: ground and feet are considered dirty. Merchandise that are kept above the level of feet (even by a few inches) are comparatively clean. Food items should not to be used if they are kept on the ground/floor for a long time thus has to be kept on different surface which I call ground cover in this document. Surprisingly, no one was concerned about the cleanliness of the cover. In regard to fresh produce like vegetables and fruits, wet items are regarded as comparatively fresh and clean. I will revisit these beliefs and their impact on *polas* that are re-designed by government in the next chapter.

At the most complicated and central part of the *pola*, the majority are back-to-back stalls each facing a path. In an area where the depth is not sufficient for back-to-back stalls, there are three

wide and shallow shops with two fronts, facing two parallel paths. The shopkeepers of these shops rotate from one side to the other and back to serve customers who come from both sides.

The division of the path provides confluences and branching offs which create opportunities for end-of-the-row shops. Some of these are circular in shape; they are the most favored by vendors. As they face the turning points of customer flows, these sites provide high level of exposure.

Some of them have three fronts at angles; in effect the end-of-the-row shops are semi-circular in the way they operate. (Figure 3.10)



Figure 3.10: An end-of-the-row shop

The first opening between the stalls where the main path divides is also an opening to the service area

of the *pola*. The service area consists of a water tap and toilet. All three in-house food providers are also located in that area. The three main regular stalls in this area are specialized in betel leaves, areca nut, lime and dried tobacco leaves, all ingredients for betel-chewing. These stalls supply *bulathwita* (chew of betel) for the whole *pola*, customers and vendors from outside who buy betel to make *bulathwitas* for sale. The vendor also engaged in wholesale for local shop owners. This is the only wholesale dealership at Kottawa Pola. (Figure 3.11)

A Century of Continuity and Change

The selling of betel leaves connects with the beginning of the *pola* for it was originally a wholesale market for betel leaves. *Bulath* in Sinhala, *paan* in Tamil, is central to the Sri Lanka culture. A *bulath heppuwa* (a tray of ingredients for betel chewing) used to be the centerpiece of the living room; guests were received by offering this betel tray. Thus growing, selling and buying an ingredient of the betel set was good business and certain parts of the country were famous for each ingredient. The region where the *pola* is located was famous for betel leaves and the Kottawa Pola was originally a wholesale market for betel leaves that were grown and



Figure 3.11: Stalls for betel leaves and tobacco

collected from the area. This was before Kottawa became a major suburb of Colombo.

Kottawa Pola is a result of a coalition between few local producers who got the support of a village leader who has a house near the most significant *handiya* that allowed the traders to sell their products in his backyard. Beginning in this small way in the 1920s, the *pola* at Kottawa Angaharuwada Pola

Handiya still serves the area, but has changed its nature and the role to suit new times and the changing customer base. (Abeyratne 2015)

According to Rathnapala (78) who lives near the *pola* remembers coming to Kottawa Pola with his father who grew betel and vegetables. His father had a bullock cart which they used to transport their produce to the *pola* and take home the household items they bought from *pola*. When he first went to the *pola* in 1967 it started on Monday late-night or Tuesday early-morning. Carts came from different parts of the region and stayed the whole night waiting for buyers who came from places as far as Jaffna in the northern peninsula of Sri Lanka. The wholesale *pola* was over by the morning and then the retail *pola* began; it was over by 2pm.

People in every corner of Sri Lanka chew betel. Yet the betel they chew is different. While the low country people like young betel leaves with a weaker strength, Jaffna people prefer stronger, fully matured leaves or *rahan kola*. With the rising tension and the civil-war, by the 1980s, Tamil wholesale buyers were not willing to risk their lives to come to the southern part of the island to buy betel. That stopped the wholesale business. Since the 1980s, Kottawa Pola has been limited to a day-time retail *pola*.

There are different stories about the location of Kottawa Pola. One of my older interlocutors, Piyasena Perera (75) remembers the Angaharuwada Pola Handiya being the center of Kottawa area during his early childhood (i.e.: the 1940s-50s). Then the main road was shifted: A new road connecting Colombo and Avissawella built in 1940's went through a different part of Kottawa. With the building of new amenities like the bus terminal and public market on the new road, the popularity of the old town dwindled. The new town center, or the Kottawa Handiya, grew, but

the *pola* and the *handiya* from the old center survived. They restructured themselves to become parts of the new town and as influential components of it.

The late-twentieth century saw the expansion of the Kottawa. After 1980, there were many suburban housing projects in Kottawa like the Mattegoda housing scheme, initiated by the government, but completed by a private developer. (Niriella 2012) The demographic changes caused by these new developments have confirmed the centrality of the new center, leaving the older center for original residents. Nonetheless, the *pola* remained the social center of the ones with a shared local history. But it grew beyond this base into an institution that serves the entire Kottawa area.

As it became an attraction to those migrating to Colombo suburbs, from the 1970s, Kottawa both grew and aspired to become more middle class, the latter preferring super markets over the *pola*. Despite these “modern” economic and social preferences and values, many of them were attracted to the *pola* too. Thus the *pola* found a new group of customers, even though they do not have a shared history related to the *pola*. The *pola* too had changed itself to cater to the new demographic group.

In an abstract sense, the generations of vendors, customers and the items in it changed but the *pola* continued. New interactions eventually created a new shared history. Today, most of the vendors know the origins of their customers who migrated to Kottawa and then became *pola* users. This is somewhat different than knowing family histories of those who have been local customers for generations, yet they are a (new) part of the *pola* community.

As vendors connected with new groups of customers, and because of new changes, some original residents felt disconnected. Piyasena (75) who used to visit the *pola* from 1959 until now said “I used to personally know 90 out of 100 people I saw at *pola*, but now 90 out of 100 I see are unknown... all kinds of people from all over the country, I don’t have many people to connect with; but we all use the *pola*!” (Figure 3.12)

Evidently, the town center has shifted to Kottawa Handiya. The center caters to those who shop at super markets; some may also use the *pola* to complement. At the same time, the role of *pola* has changed and taken a new role that can include new people. Thus the *pola* and the old *handiya* have not only found accommodation in the new structure and the economic and social fabric but have also influenced it.



Figure 3.12: Friends and/or neighbors meet at *pola*

Not all *polas* have survived modernization and other changes. There used to be a Sikurada Pola (Friday Pola), also in Kottawa, at a *handiya* towards the west of the current center on Kottawa - Piliyandala road. There is no *pola* there anymore. Quite possibly, that *handiya* could have also been an old regional center with the Sikurada Pola playing a major role. None of this exists today. Hence, I am not generalizing the historical trajectory of the Angaharuwada Pola. Nonetheless, there are a lot of *polas* that have continued their functions in Sri Lanka; some of these in the proximity are addressed in the next chapter, but in regard to *pola* networks.

Actors and their roles

The actors of *pola*, are not easily identifiable by their dress or by where they are located. My characterization of actors comes from my observations and interactions with certain individuals I met at Kottawa and/or Malabe *pola*. The results should not be overly generalized to all *polas* or to all members of any actor group. More importantly, the roles are highly complex as almost all individuals play more than one role. In this section, I will introduce the actors and analyze a few individuals in regard to their multiple roles and the processes and structures through which they act.

There are a few types of **suppliers**: the wholesalers, large-scale retail traders and small-scale retail traders. The two categories other than the wholesalers are the vendors at *pola*. Some of



Figure 3.13: Local porters (*nattami*) unloading goods from a delivery truck coming from the Manning wholesale market in Colombo

them supply goods (or carryout the wholesaler function) to other vendors too. (Figure 3.13)

The **wholesalers** buy large amounts of agricultural produce from wholesale markets, the main ones

being the Manning Market in Colombo. Some also buy from the Meegoda Special Economic Center, a regional collection and distribution center for vegetables. They then transport these to *polas* and charge a fee for the service from small retail vendors.

Meegoda is reputed to have fresh vegetables. Tony the vendor (addressed in Chapter Four) who buys from Meegoda has a reputation for selling (more) fresh vegetables. Hence, the vendors call

fresh vegetables, “*badu nikam Tonyge wage*” (the goods (produce) are of high quality like Tony’s).

The wholesalers are men; there are no evidences of female wholesalers. They own a large vehicle (trucks, lorries, vans) in which they transport produce. Supported by helpers, porters and a driver, they begin the day very early; some even the night before *pola*. They not only control the supply for the *pola*, but also play a significant role in deciding its daily schedule, especially as the vendors depend on their deliveries. The wholesalers work closely with the porters at the *pola*.

Large-scale retail vendors buy produce directly from wholesale markets or directly from producers and suppliers. In addition to *pola* customers, they also sell produce to retail customers: shop owners in the area who buy in (smaller) bulks to sell in their stores. (Figure 3.14)



Figure 3.14: The process of setting up Nimal’s snack stall

These traders are mostly male, but include a few woman. Each large-scale trader owns a small personal vehicle: van, three-wheeler, or smaller truck. They have larger stalls in the *pola* and are supported by a few helpers: carrier, storekeeper, cashier and driver. Some of them play several roles such as driver and storekeeper. They work on an independent time schedule. At times these traders provide transport for small vendors and/or supply produce.

Small-scale retail vendors make up the majority of vendors at the *pola*. They are intermediaries who buy produce from wholesalers, collect produce from the locality, or buy from those who bring produce to the *pola*. Their customers include *pola* vendors and local retail shop owners (outside the *pola*) who buys a particular supply from them. Many of them own or pay daily rent for a smaller structure at the *pola*, but some share a larger stall with few other small vendors. Some others occupy smaller areas between two “permanent structures” or along the aisle and set up a stall using minimum resources. Some, especially the renters, have a fixed location and the lower end retailers wait until the *pola* starts to occupy a space of an absentee vendor.

Almost all women and elderly men are small scale retailers; they do not have paid workers to help them, but some are accompanied by a family member. The small-scale retailers are more specialized for specific local products such as cassava, jackfruit, greens, indigenous yams and organic fruits. They fill the gaps between fixed structures, expand the aisles, or create extra aisles through their selection of place for the day. With this, they define the daily shape and composition of the *pola* on that particular day. They do not have their own transportation, but use public transport or share a vehicle of another retail vendor. They bring the supplies such as a stool, a few ground sheets, food and drinks to *pola* from home; some leave these at a local resident’s place. (Figure 3.15)

Shopkeepers who operate the shops, whether owners or workers, begin their work after produce arrives. Produce usually arrives before the shopkeepers. The shopkeepers prepare their stall for



the day; they set up the display, set prices according to that day's market, maintain the display in correct order and condition throughout the day and keep working to attract customers. During the day, they monitor the progress, keep making everyday decisions and adjust (if necessary) to match the changes in flow of the *pola*. For example, if the *pola* continues until late, the shopkeeper looks for a source of lighting.

Most shopkeepers own their stalls. They are rarely female; if the shopkeeper is female usually her husband owns the store. If they trust someone else to manage the store and/or be in charge of money that is usually a relative or a very close friend who has been there for a long period as an apprentice. Still the vendors may trust more people to be responsible for other tasks.

Mobile vendors around the *pola* buy or make their own products, mainly food items such as snacks, on site. Some mobile vendors also sell items such as plastic shopping bags and others sell their own products such as garment items, sandals, and fruits from their own trees. While some mobile vendors come to *pola* regularly, others come periodically.

These mobile vendors do not enter the *pola* site, but park their vehicles near the entrances and tap into the gathering of retail customers. They may know a few vendors around the entrances but are not a part of the *pola* community. As previously mentioned, they do not pay a ground rent as they are parked on the public road not part of the *pola*. This non-payment highlights the sense of permanency or not the customers and vendors have about the *pola* and particular actors. Some of the structures like vehicles are as strong as any ordinary business conducted in fixed shop structures in the town and some vendors sell at *pola* on a regular basis. Thus, the permanency of a business is not defined by the permanency of the material of the building in which the business

is conducted. This is a gap between the locals' and the authorities' (including planners') understanding.

Mobile vendors inside the *pola* are a different group. They are mobile because they sell to both retail customers and the *pola* vendors. They sell specific items such as lotteries, re-loads for mobile phones, mosquito nets, pirated DVD copies of movies from many parts of the world, rat repellent chemicals, traditional herbal toothpaste, and plastic bags. Most of these businesses cannot be conducted in fixed structures in a fixed place; they move within the *pola* or visit particular places or vendors. Some of them do not come to *pola* every week, but once or twice a month –some once every three months-- depending on the product they sell. For instance the rat repellent seller comes every three months when, according to his knowledge, his customers (*pola* vendors) are out of stock. (Figure 3.16)



Figure 3.16: Mobile vendors inside *pola*

The mosquito net seller (and producer) comes once a year since mosquito nets are not bought more frequently. He visits almost every city in the country allocating a month for each region looking for new customers instead of renewing the supply for old customers. Every year when he visits a particular *pola* there are new vendors; what matters then is the recommendation made by old customers. I witnessed my employer and a key informant Nimal, making a recommendation

to Manoj who met the mosquito net seller for the first time, leading to a transaction. These vendors are not visible to the ground rent collector and therefore do not pay anyone to conduct their businesses.

Mostly male, some of these mobile vendors are producers of what they sell, or simply the travelling sales agent for a family business. For example, the mosquito seller's wife makes mosquito nets with the support of few girls and the husband goes around the country to sell them. Some have ways to communicate with the vendors at *pola* and are close friends with some of them. Both their customer base and knowledge expands because of these connections. The internal mobile vendors hear about potential markets for their produce simply through the interactions with the *pola* vendors who are connected to more local *polas* and more up-to-date with the changes in them. Most of these sellers use public transport and some use small vehicles they can easily park outside any *pola*. (Figure 3.17)



Figure 3.17: Mosquito net vendor

In addition to those who go around the *pola* to sell, there is another set of mobile vendors who do not have a specific vending spot, but look for one within the regular *pola*. This practice has given rise to a community of ‘**floating vendors**’ who do not have their own or rented shop structures. They come in the morning and

settle in the places of absentee vendors, mostly for the final three quarters of the *pola* days. During my first few days, I noticed a shift of vending places by 10 to 15 vendors, around 10-11

am (after tea time) on every *pola* day. Indicating that Kottawa Pola is a stock clearance *pola* all vendors of which does not come every *pola* day, the group of ‘infill’ vendors adds diversity to the soft structure or organization of *pola* and specificity and identity to Kottawa Pola. (Figure 3.18)

Similar shift of vendors happens around 3-4 pm and 6-7 pm when two other groups of vendors leave *pola*. Tony, who buys a small stock from a large variety of vegetables especially from Meegoda, aims to finish his day by 4 pm. Tony and his crew leaves the *pola* anytime between 2-4 pm opening up his stall to a second vendor, who joins the *pola* only around that time.



Figure 3.18: Hemawathie's floating tea shop

Most female vendors, especially the ones who use public transport and the mothers who go home to cook dinner, leave the *pola* before dark. Some male vendors join the *pola* at this time taking over the spaces the ladies occupied during the day. One such night-time-vendor is an army officer, who sells dried fish at Kottawa Pola from

7 to 10 pm. He has started coming to the *pola* a few months ago when he was suspended from work, until some charges against him were cleared. He works as a taxi driver during the day and comes to *pola* at night to earn enough to support his family and pay the lawyers. As victims of the overly formalized society ruled by the rules of the state and values of the middle class, allows room for survival, these part-time short-term vendors provide a platform for the ‘odds’ or the exemptions. Although this particular group may not feature at all *polas*, all *polas* have such flexibility and openness.

Local Porters called *nattamis* are usually residents in the area around a specific *pola*, Kottawa Pola is served by 4 local porters. They help the suppliers to unload produce that comes from wholesale markets or other *polas*. Local porters are the first to reach the *pola* and wait for the supplies. They distribute the produce to stalls or locations of each vendor before the shopkeepers arrive. They typically work for and are paid by the vendors and not by the wholesalers or transport service providers. (Figure 3.19)

There are also porters who work for the wholesalers. They come in trucks, download the goods, and let the *nattamis* deliver these to the stalls. They work for the transport service or for the wholesaler who owns the produce-distributing vehicle. Both these kinds of workers work with the porters at wholesale markets to load the supply and help local *pola* porters to unload them.



Figure 3.19: A local porter during his job (morning) and as a *pola* customer in the evening of the same day

They are paid LKR 20 (USD 0.14) for each piece they carry on their back. This is a job that is limited to only males.

They have the best knowledge of the layout of the *pola* and remember the codes for every vendor's produce. They work only in the morning and in the evening, working mainly to load and unload the produce. Some porters go home, whereas some work for a merchant during the day, as a helper at a stall. Some sell produce that is found from *pola* or from the local area to make extra income. These porters are considered lowest-status among the *pola* actors, therefore are not well respected by others. The porters are accused by other *pola* actors of drug and alcohol

abuse, which is thought to numb the pain caused by the heavy physical labor. Yet the vendors fear and/or respect the porters as they are the ones who deliver the supply. Therefore the vendors pay the porters without fail.

They also have the best knowledge on *pola raumas* (circuits), especially which *pola* operates on which day, but not much knowledgeable of their layouts because they do not involve in the distribution of produce within *polas*. *Pola raumas* are the clustering of local *polas* by means of the same vendor selling in them. (See Chapter Four) These porters begin work on the previous night and ends when produce is distributed to *pola*, usually before 9 am.

Helpers are not common. The ones who do exist are typically affiliated with trade teams that are paid by a large-scale retail vendor. These men (I have not seen women helpers) are paid a good monthly salary for supporting many functions including buying, selling, transporting, sorting and handling produce and, sometimes, for representing the employer at wholesale markets and in other social functions. They do not have a clear job description but are expected to cover the employer's back in any situation ranging from a product deficit needing a quick supply to a local dispute and fight. They are paid LKR 1,000-1,500 (6 -10 USD) per workday and some vendors also donate a weekly packet of produce for the family. Apart from *pola* duties, some helpers deliver a weekly order of goods to local shop owners.

Non-affiliated helpers do not have a clear job description; they arrive at *pola* looking for a job, with no idea as to who will employ them and for what purpose. They are usually asked to help with the preparation of goods for display, cleaning the stalls, bring water from the tap to the stalls during the business day and other casual jobs of this nature. I have observed them providing supplies to *pola* vendors that are collected from the local area; such items include

leaves of the ‘elephant ear’ plant to wrap fish and jackfruit and old newspapers for wrapping dry products. They get paid a minimal amount of cash, some goods and/or sometimes the mere company or some alcohol at the end of the day.

Although these helpers are mostly young males, some older vendors associate with some of them as they have worked together for some time; they are now more or less friends. For example, Siri (helper) hid the alcohol bottle for Gunapala (vendor) when I saw it.

Although rare, there are female helpers. They usually work with female vendors, and are mostly relatives of the vendors: sisters or mothers/daughters in law. Some female family members, mostly mothers and wives, support the businesses of their sons and husbands. Some of them eventually continue the same business or begin new businesses depending on their interest, will and capacity. According to Bulath Aunty (lit. betel aunt) started coming to *pola* with her mother-in-law but took over the business after she passed away. Karunawathie helped her son to begin his own fruit business, without pay, but once he got established and hired a few male helpers, she started her own small fruit stall at a different location at the same *pola*. She was interested partly out of her habit, but also to save some money for her retirement.

Another group of helpers are those who **prepare produce for sale**. Some merchandise needs more attention and time for preparation and that creates opportunities for new jobs; Sriyani helps 2-3 large-scale retail vendors who also goes to other *polas* by preparing their produce for sale. She walks between their stall the whole day, cleaning, sorting and grading big onions and potatoes that are sold at Kottawa and other *polas* in the next few days. In this sense, *polas* go beyond the site and time of operation on a given date; every operating day is a preparation day for a different *pola*. See next chapter for a discussion on how *pola* exceeds time and space,

challenging the geographical, political and administrative boundaries adopted and imposed by outside actors.

The Kottawa Pola has **public characters**. They are usually older men mostly from the local area with no other significant income or relatives. One such famous character is known as ‘Prime Minister’ who was once a rich person in the area, but now is isolated from the family and has no wealth. He enjoys being in the *pola* and associating the vendors; the vendors are in return entertained by his political jokes and stories from the past. He claims that he was once invited to be the Prime Minister and shares the incidents from an imaginary trip to the Parliament. (Figure 3.20)

I once gave him my lunch after observing him being fed by other vendors. He easily became a friend. Although not so clean, he is not a beggar, rather a friend of the *pola*. On non-*pola* days he sits on the verandah of the teashop with his dog. At times, he sleeps at *pola*. He is a silent protector of the *pola*. The *pola* community knows how he should be treated; he gets their company, time, food and protection everyone loves him but no one gives him money because he spends it on alcohol.



Figure 3.20: ‘Prime Minister’ at Kottawa Pola and Handiya

In addition to direct *pola* actors, there are many **service providers** who are not in the *pola*. A main group is **moneylenders and stall owners**. There is a lot of money exchange at the *pola* and

many lend/borrow money at no interest on a friendship basis. There are also “official” moneylenders; but two are well known among the vendors.

Lalee, a main moneylender is a large-scale retailer who owns a vegetable stall. He provides money for many small-scale retail vendors to buy their merchandise on daily basis. He lends money in the morning and comes back at night to collect his money with percent interest. In

Lalee’s words:

It’s a service that I do. The banks do not give this kind of loans especially to small vendors like these and I do not get any income by keeping this money in my pocket. It serves both parties and I know that I am helping many families to run their income cycle by doing this. Mainly, the money they take is to buy the merchandise they sell at *pola*, they settle the money at the evening and go home with some profit. Without my money, they cannot buy produce to begin with. Sometimes, they borrow money for personal emergencies and such loans have to be settled within a month or two.(Author’s translation)

Lalee has a group of helpers (4-5 men in their twenties or thirties) who manages his stall at Kottawa Pola and also keeps track of the vendors who borrowed money. They do not keep accounts of the transactions, but it does not mean that they are not recorded. When I asked how he makes sure that he gets paid back, Lalee told me that he knows the method to get what he owes with a mischievous grin. He is medium in size, dresses more like a helper of a stall and is not threatening in the way he looks or talks.

Lalee is respected in a different way to others: He is greeted by many. He also goes around whole *pola* around 7 pm. He stops at a stall and starts a discussion on a current political issue or the economic conditions of the country. While participating in the discussion the vendor settles his money with interest. They never talk about the transaction, but that is the main purpose of Lalee’s visit. I noticed a change in the tone of some vendors when they talk to him, and my

possible biased interpretation is that it is a different form of respect; it is not driven by fear but a feeling of the need to maintain a decent relationship that guarantees access to money at a time of hardship.

The other moneylender Sugath was not ready to share information on his business routine or strategies; all I know about him came from other vendors. He owns a dry fish business at Kottawa Pola and owns a regular dry fish shop in the town he lives in. He also owns more than one stall at Kottawa Pola and collects rent from small retail vendors who share these stalls for their businesses. Rumors are that he never buys these structures but keeps claiming the ownership of stalls that goes unoccupied when somebody dies or stops their *pola* career or limiting the number of *polas* they visit. After some time, he starts to look for small vendors who do not have structures and offers spaces at a cheaper rent. Most of these actions are first perceived as kindness and support by new vendors who are looking for a space to begin their *pola* career.

Sugath is infamous among established *pola* vendors but is a hero among some who just started their career at Kottawa Pola. According to another rumor at Kottawa about his ventures at other larger *polas* he visits, he sells *pola* spaces he owns instead of renting them. The source said that, at *polas* where local government is involved it is hard to run the renting business but safe to make a one-time transaction off the record. The ground rent for a medium size structure is LKR 50 at Kottawa. Sugath seems to charge LKR 150 from each of the three small vendors who occupy one of his structures for which he pays LKR 50 to the landowner. To buy a similar size structure (not from Sugath), Nandana has paid LKR 50,000 at once. The ground rent is therefore a huge bargain. The landowner does not seem to be aware of this new rent potential.

Food vendors provide an essential service. Some stay at the *pola* for the full day or part of it; some visit once or a few times a day. A middle-aged man Ananda who goes by the nickname “Muwa” cooks breakfast and early lunch by himself and comes to *pola* by 7 am. He sets up a stall as a canteen on the eastern backyard of the *pola* and stays until he runs out of food or until the food goes bad. Usually the prior happens before 11 am and he then takes a bus home. He does the same at Maharagama Pola on three other days of the week. (Figure 3.21)

Jayatissa is the main provider of lunch, he visits the *pola* sometime between 1-3 pm with lunch parcels and walks around the *pola* to sell them. He has regular customers and new unexpected customers like me; he is prepared for both. He provides food for Malabe, Athurugiriya and Kottawa *polas*. He lives at Hokandara located in the middle of three *polas*.

He pays a woman from his neighborhood to cook for all the *polas*. The woman and her child get three free meals a day and a daily wage of LKR 200 (USD 2). He brings more than 20 lunch

packets to Kottawa and sells at LKR 60. Saturdays and Thursdays are his holidays.

The most common critic for Jayatissa is his lack of punctuality; I witnessed how this was used as an opportunity to



Figure 3.21 : Muwaa (Ananda) serving customers at Kottawa Pola

expand a food-supply business at Malabe into Kottawa. The information and support to the vendor in Malabe was provided by Nimal. Nimal’s friend Manju who drives a taxi and a truck that belongs to an established businessman at Malabe Pola also started selling lunch packets pre ordered at Malabe Pola. By the time I finished my fieldwork, six weeks since Manju started his

business at Kottawa, the two lunch providers had a similar number of customers and their attention was diverted to changing their own business strategies instead of blaming the opponent.

Sumith, on other hand, visits *pola* twice on his motor bicycle carrying bakery products, both sweet and hot, in a wooden and glass showcase built onto the bicycle. He targets the two tea times (10-11 am and 3-4 pm), In addition to the tea drinkers, some who cannot afford to buy lunch and/or breakfast also wait to buy something from Sumith and pass the day satisfying their hunger with two snacks and a few cups of tea.

Tea is the most popular drink at *pola* (and across Sri Lanka) and there are few ways to get tea to vendor stalls. Hemawathie, is the main provider of tea for whole *pola*. She arrives by 7 am and collects her equipment that she had left at a nearby house. The only thing she carries from *pola* to *pola* is a plastic bucket in which she carefully packs 30 small glasses. Two kettles (one for tea and one for coffee), 2 (more) buckets (one to store water and the other for washing), a plastic basin, a vessel, three plastic bottles for tea, sugar and coffee powder and, most importantly, a kerosene based portable stove, a small metal sheet to set that on and a bottle of kerosene are her assets.

Hemawathie is a floating vendor; she does not have a set location, she sets up her stall somewhere between two structures, and sometimes in an absentee's structure. On some days she waits for a vendor who leaves early and moves to his/her stall. But she does not leave the eastern backyard of the *pola*, as that is the area where her customers expect to find her. Her method is to deliver glasses of tea and/or coffee once she gets an order that comes through a helper of a stall or through some other vendor who passes her on his/her way to the toilet.

She becomes very busy during the two tea times and her sister Karunawathie comes to support her during those times; one makes drinks while the other delivers them. Hemawathie's biggest supporter is Anuradha who sells dry food items that includes everything Hemawathie needs for her business. Here the strength and wealth of Hemawathie is social capital, particularly materialized through the support she gets from her sister and Anuradha.

Every morning Hemawathie borrows tea, sugar and coffee from Anuradha. She keeps borrowing throughout the day and pays him at the end of the day after her last round of tea delivery. After the last round of delivery she goes around the *pola* and collects her dues. She then buys spices, vegetables and other supplies for her and her sister mostly at concessionary prices. Karunawathie told me that Hemawathie is her favorite sister because she has always provided her with household supplies for the week in return for her support for Hemawathie's business. Social capital plays a huge role at the *pola*.

The largest group of vendors at the *pola* is the small-scale retailers who do not own personal vehicles to transport themselves or their merchandise. They depend on **transport providers**. They either seek help of a fellow vendor who takes part in the same *pola* circuit as them, or pay a merchandise transport service to pick up and deliver their goods before and after each *pola* they participate. The arrangements with fellow vendors are more personal and hard to keep track of. Yet, Ruwan who provides a very organized transport service for Kottawa Pola provides an insight into how this system works.

Ruwan lives in Habarakada (near Maharagama) and transports goods between Kottawa, Homagama, and Athurugiriya *polas*. He arrives at Kottawa Pola by 5 am every Tuesday and meets Upasena (local porter) who helps Ruwan unload the sacks, boxes and bundles of whatever

goods come on that day. These belong to vendors who come to Kottawa Pola. Every item is marked in purple color ink and indicates a code such as DLX or PKD. These mystery codes are the initials of each vendor (i.e.: PKD = P. K. Danapala) to whom the item belongs. The codes are varied; at times they are the initials of the original business owner who does not come to *pola* anymore or have passed away, transferring the space to their sons or new owners. The same codes are still in use by his successors. Ruwan has a book with lists of vendors of items and the number of pieces transported for each of them. Fifteen to twenty vendors at Kottawa Pola, receive his service. (Figure 3.22)

Upasena the main *nattami* knows all the codes for Kottawa, by memory, and knows the stall or the locations to where he ought to deliver goods, yet he does not keep account of how many pieces he should unload from the truck. Ruwan operates the service on his own and he works with local porters like Upasena for each *pola*. When Upasena completes his work by about 6.30 am, Ruwan locks the truck and takes a bus home for his daytime job. Driving the truck back home is not economical in his view and his experience guarantees that it is safe to leave the truck parked at pola.



Figure 3.22: Ruwan and his truck (the truck is parked at Pola throughout the daytime operations of *pola*)

The truck is left with items that belong to vendors who do not participate in Kottawa Pola. These will stay in the truck until they are

delivered to their respective owners at a different *pola* the next day, or the day after. In this sense, Ruwan's truck acts as storage, providing space and protection for goods between *polas*.

He parks the truck at his residence and his watchdog protects it from burglars. For all these services he charges LKR 50 per large piece, over 50 kg, and LKR 25 for a smaller piece. Some of these pieces are sacks or boxes of vegetables, fruits, dry fish, empty cash boxes, scales or bundles of equipment that are used to set up stalls.

Ruwan comes back to Kottawa Pola around 7.30 pm. Upasena or another local porter awaits him to load the remaining stocks that belongs to Ruwan's regular customers. For these customers, Ruwan's arrival is the time to finish the day; they start packing and the porters take them back to the truck. When loading, Ruwan stands on the truck and arranges the stacks in a way that would be convenient and not confusing for the porters who would unload them in the following



Figure 3.23: Bank officers from NSB at Kottawa pola

morning at a different *pola*. The process takes less than two hours and he clears the daily transactions with vendors after that.

Kottawa Pola has two other transporters. Ruwan mentioned that his business has grown smaller since the introduction of smaller and cheaper goods transport vehicles and loan facilities to buy these. Malabe Pola has three very larger scale transporters and there are similar services for other *pola* circuits such as Malabe-Kaduvela-

Athurugiriya and Maharagama-Homagama.

There are also **external helpers**, people and institutions who support the *pola*, but from outside. They include **mobile-savings officers**, those who sell and repair scales, and Taxi services. The

most irregular visitors to the *pola* are two well-dressed bank officers. They are expected every week yet come very irregularly. One of them is friends with Nimal and I was able to ask them about the mobile (hand-held) banking machine they carry around. (Figure 3.23)

Few years ago, the National Saving Bank started these entrepreneurial visits to *polas* all across the country to tap into the savings of *pola* vendors that does not reach formal savings channels. Every branch of the bank was provided with a mobile savings machine. *Pola* vendors believe in more free, creative and alternative methods of saving money such as *seettu*. Here a group of people contributes a set amount of money every month for the same number of months as the number of group members and each month's collection goes to one member. The beneficiary of the month is determined by a draw which is also called *seetu*.

The vendors tease the bank officers about their machine being broken all the time especially when they visit the *pola* after few weeks of absence. Moreover, I was personally entertained by the irregularity and unpredictability of the members of the 'formal sector' who visit the 'informal market' so categorized in mainstream studies and knowledge. The bank is too rigid to come to *pola*; the people who work for the bank can come, but they operate at an informal level, buying vegetables at the *pola* and getting small free gifts (such as pickle) from *pola* vendors.

Vendors and repairmen of scales, Saman who works for Fashion scales visits *polas* on behalf of his company when he receives a telephone call to repair a scale he sold or from a new customer who received his contact from an old customer. He also buys and sells old scales. His unique characteristic is that he visits *pola* only by request.

The *pola* provides a space and an audience for a **variety of other actors** ranging from beggars and performers to monks and politicians seeking daily alms and votes. Some like beggars can be seen at *pola* regularly, at the same space, during the same times while others like politicians arrive when they have a need.

I was fortunate to be entertained by a **circus guy** who stood on his head to please the *pola* community and earn some donations. He only visited once during my three months at Kottawa Pola. I was told that he can be found in Colombo fort during the day and he visits *polas* around Colombo when he is bored. He is known among the vendors who visit Manning (wholesale) Market at Colombo and it is through them that he learned about Kottawa and the other *polas* he visits. He opted to perform at the intersection where the main customer flow divides into two paths and he remained there for a few hours until his daily target was accomplished. (Figure 3.24)

One day a *mehenin wahansa* (Buddhist “nun”) entered the *pola* from the north entrance and walked through it. Almost every vendor made use of the opportunity to offer some food mostly from her/his own display table. The vendors who do not sell items that are not suitable for offering a monk borrowed fresh or cooked food from other vendors to offer. The transactions show the relationships: the vendor whose merchandize was borrowed (without even asking) did not even ask for the items back; that did not bother the stall owners because it is important for the other vendor not to miss the opportunity to offer food to a monk. Besides, complaining about offerings may bring bad karma to him/her. The dues were settled later in the day.



Figure 3.24: The circus guy (head standing)

She walked slowly without uttering a single word, paying special attention to everyone who stopped her with offerings. The aisles turned into a sacred space where she was offered food and paid respect by clapping the hands. In return, she gave the vendors *anumodana* (thanks and blessings in a Buddhist way).

I too purchased some fruits to offer; I did not touch the fruits with my bare/ unwashed hands (per normal ritual) but carefully placed them in her bowl using a plastic bag as a glove. She showed me the inedible parts, leaves and the stalks that were left on fruits, and signaled to remove them before I offered. I took them back and removed those parts and placed them back again in the bowl before kneeling down to respect her.

I could not stop reflecting on her adaptation to the suburban environment. I learned from the vendors that visiting the *pola* is a deliberate decision of hers. Monks and nuns who seek alms for food usually visit residential areas before lunchtime. Yet there are only a few people who stay at home during this time on weekdays. Hence they visit the *pola* and other such gathering places. *Pola* is a site of negotiation, even for monks.

I also witnessed a female singer with a *rabana* (hand held drum) visiting *pola* twice during my presence. Yet, she was not a stranger for the community. She walked around for a few hours stopping at the intersections of paths in the *pola* singing songs that were requested by the vendors. Some sang along with her and many donated her some money after a performance while exchanging the latest news about each other. It was like a relative visiting the '*pola* family.' (Figure 3.25)



Figure 3.25: Female singer with *Rabaana*

Although the social and cultural aspects of the visit were far more significant, the economical side of the visit was understood and fulfilled by both parties. She performed and they donated her some money. This was not the result of the relationship between the

actors. It was only a reason for a complex set of relationships that are deeper than economic transactions.

According to my observation, the relationship between the singer and the *pola* community is representative of the majority of human connections and economic transactions that take place at the *pola*. Economic activities such as buying and selling of products and/or services/labor are simply one particular need among many that brings the *pola* community together. While there are other compatibilities such as social and cultural that brings them together in a journey of complex relationships.

When Seelawathie had a broken back, a customer and a grocery store owner, helped her with money. Almost 15 years later he went out of business. He began a small betel business after a stretch of bad fortune. Seelawathie now lends betel leaves for him to make betel-chewing packs that he sells through stores. He continues to settle the money a week after borrowing betel leaves.

This is beyond an economic interaction. The basic economic relationships at the *pola* give rise to social relationships among the actors. In turn, more economic transactions are produced through the social relationships including friendships, support systems, communities and deeper personal connections such as marriages.

The material economic exchange is neither the beginning nor the end of the life journeys of the *pola* actors. Many relationships begin with prior acquaintances with no knowledge how they might end. As Michael Carrithers (1992) illustrates in *Why Humans Have Cultures*, materials becomes a means to human relationships and produces other material as part of such relationships, but what is central is the relationship and not the material. When such processes are studied through mainstream academic or political frameworks, the tangible material captures more attention and is viewed as the key result of the process; as a result, the process is reduced to something that produces a material output. This is exactly how the *pola* has been reduced,, facilitated and upgraded as a mere economic institution and a structure in all *pola* development projects.

The social processes in *pola* which produces a bundle of meaningful human interactions is one aspect where the *pola* stands out and operates at a more complex level (beyond economic connections), in contrast to supermarkets and other formal middle-class markets. According to Nimal, “when a customer visits a supermarket, he is greeted by the term ‘sir’, that means so much to our people. But when you think carefully, these people [who call you sir] will never attend your funeral.” In this he refers to local values such as respecting friendship through attending a wedding or a funeral in comparison to middle-class modern values that privilege the economy and formal relationships.

Suduwa and Chuti Manike (pet names) are a blind, married couple who are regularly seen at the *pola*. Wife is completely blind and walks to *pola* holding on to her husband’s shoulder who can see a little but enhances it by using a white stick to navigate. Every morning Suduwa walks his wife to her usual spot between the intersection where the single path from south entrance divides

to two and the large intersection where the main path divides into four at the center of *pola*. He makes her sit right in the middle of the aisle where the passageway is wider. Chuti Manike then divides the flow into two. This is also an important place where some performers act. Chuti Manike sits on a thick paper and uses an umbrella as her roof. Although this is an area without a structure, in a relative sense, Chuti Menike sitting and her umbrella are obvious and well known; they provide sense of place. (Figure 3.26)

Chuti Menike sells cotton wicks for oil lamps and incense that she keeps on her lap along with a piece of cardboard sign that says “*As nopenena anda ma hata pihitawanna*” (please help the blind person who cannot see). More produce is in a bag behind her and a bowl in front of her to collect money the others donate and she receives from the sales of her products. If she is not busy talking with a vendor of a stall near her, she sings her usual song:

Enna mehen- udawwak karala yannako!
Deken ekak geniyanna – katha karala illanna
Mang methane – mang methane !”
 (come from this side; help me before you leave!
 Buy one of the two items, talk to me and ask for what you want
 I am here, I am here!)



Figure 3.26: Suduwa and Chutimanike

Her husband walks in the *pola*, selling a variety of plastic bags to passers by; these bags are lended by Anuradha, a young grocery vendor, every morning. Suduwa settles the balance at the end of the day. The couple's day ends around 4.30 pm. Their departure is eventful; Suduwa leads the way as usual while Chuti Manike salutes her favorite vendors. She

knows exactly who they are passing, normally by their voices. For them, the *pola* is a soundscape where individual voices represent places, people and products. As she salutes different vendors, they receive parcels of potatoes, onions, vegetables and spices. Chuti Manike thanks every person and never fails to use the right name for each vendor. They walk to Anuradha's shop and she chats with a group of vendors as her husband settles the day's transactions with Anuradha. When someone told her that I was observing, Chuti Manike shared the following with me:

We come to *pola* partly because we get our daily food supply in addition to some income. The income is just enough to cover the rent. We go to a few *polas*, and they (different *pola* communities) all love us and help us! *Pola* is a fun place... (Author's translation)

When Suduwa is done, they silently walk to the bus stop and take a bus to Malabe. I also witnessed some flows of information among the members of this actor group whose interests and audience is somewhat similar.

There are also **absentee actors** the main one being the **landowner(s)**. While there are six owners to Kottawa Pola site at the moment, Laxman Amarasekara is the one frequently deals with the Pola. Owners **provide** the land/space, water and a lavatory for *pola*. In return, they receive a monthly ground rent. The real value of business space which is evident in the story of Sugath, the moneylender and others, is illegible to the owners. My interviews with Laxman indicated that he is stuck in the middle-class belief that the *pola* is a failing traditional institution. His notions of rent are stuck within the frame of an old *pola* which he used to know. Yet, he is frustrated that he cannot earn the amount that he could have earned if he leased the *pola* land to a private business. To match this amount, he made a few attempts to raise the ground rent of *pola* which were discouraged by his main source of information, the ground rent collector (see below). The

owner was told that the *pola* vendors were not willing to pay any more since the facilities for *pola* are not improved. He cancelled the raise he planned due to fear of potential backlash. Thus, the *pola* has certain power over him; and gossip/rumor plays a huge role in shaping his actions.

The **Ground rent collector** Chaminda collects the dues for the landowner every week. He is one of the two tenants who live on *pola* land. He is also in-charge of the toilet and the water supply. He gets a laborer to clean the *pola* land. At the end of the month he settles the balance to the landowners.

Chaminda is self-employed as a three-wheeler taxi owner and driver. His wife has a grocery store in the front room of their (rented) house on *pola* land. They buy groceries for the store from the *pola*. The *pola* vendors call him *casi* Chaminda (money Chaminda) with the view that he is corrupt and cheats a part of the income from ground rent. He declined to give me an interview. He avoided an interview even when I hired his taxi.

The *Pola* Atmosphere

The ‘*pola*-goers’ –largely customers—are an important group of *pola* actors. It is not so familiar for the first-time visitor. Kottawa Pola is a maze of some sort where the customers may feel disoriented with structures and vendors everywhere. As the visitor enters the *pola*, there is a sense of losing personal space and control as though her/his personal space is being intruded.

Nonetheless, Kottwa and other *polas* have their own visitors and they are quite familiar with the layout, the vendors, the merchandize and prices.

It is hard to maintain personal space: the visitors' eyes are attracted by too many choices and their ears with too many suggestions from vendors. The vendors might even walk up to the customer with few of their products in their hands, especially at desperate moments like the evenings on a rainy day when the sales are low; they can also wrap a bunch of items together and offer them at a cheaper price in a bit more forceful (yet harmless) way.

Whether a vendor approaches or not, as the customer walks along the narrow path defined by small structures which display hundreds of goods ranging from fish, vegetables, fruits, plastic and metal utensils to dried fish, spices, rice, coconuts, betel leaves, sweets, snacks, clothing and (pirated) DVD copies of popular movies s/he will soon be amused to know that s/he is in a space-stream that provides nothing but choices. The structures are short too, making the *pola* cramped and congested.

Providing specificity to the *pola*, the entrance from Kottawa-Athurugiriya road (the main entrance of sort) is marked by a few fish stalls. The visitor cannot escape the strong fish smell and to some the smell is horrific whereas for others it is the identity. Others who dislike the fish smell use the other entrance.

The customers move along each path in two lines, looking at either side, observing the merchandise, buying, and discussing various questions with the vendors. Mobile vendors and porters move between the customers, gently, but sometimes violently pushing others to reach their preferred vendors or deliver more stocks. Porters also yell asking for more room to move

with goods in their hands, on their shoulders, or heads. This way they try not to sacrifice their speed.

With all these movements, speed and many sounds taking place in the same space at the same time, the *pola* provides a very complex, fast moving and noisy experience. Most constant is the vendors advertising –telling-- what they sell when customers pass by. Interacting with vendors, the customers bargain for better prices; some also ask for more specific information on particular items they wish to buy or try.

As a visitor enters the *pola* s/he is greeted with salutations that suits her/his look. If the person is a young female in a casual dress, she will be called *nangi* (younger sister) and if above 40 she will be called *akka* (older sister). If she is well dressed, irrespective of her age she is called *nona*, meaning madam. Corresponding addresses for the opposite gender are *malli*, *ayya*, and *mahaththaya* (or boss). This type of addressing is common in Sri Lanka, but it is intense at the *pola* where the vendors strive to attract potential customers. The greetings can also differ on the time of the day or whether one is familiar or not. The vendors know most *pola* customers and they notice new faces. The questions, greetings and comments are ways to develop acquaintance with new customers.

Regular customers greet them back, sometimes as loud as the vendors; some stop by to share the week's news. The process of becoming a regular was similar for me: At the beginning I felt threatened in the unfamiliar environment and unknown faces. Eventually I started to look forward to the feeling of a large group of people welcoming me to their domain. I found a few people who were willing to talk with me at length following the greetings. Some did the exact opposite: They avoided when they learned that I was not a customer; they wanted to save that

time for potential customers. During my last few weeks of fieldwork, I grew close enough to greet the known vendors first, as I entered the *pola*. They greeted me back or teased me about my dress or the ‘never ending research’, but I did not find those threatening anymore.

The *pola* is also a caring and nurturing place. Siri, a helper, once hid the alcohol bottle for Gunapala (vendor) when I saw it. This is how the helpers earn the trust. Although rare, some helpers find their way to become shopkeepers and eventually becoming businessmen.

Being an apprentice is a path to establishing a business. Most successful businessmen were once apprentices, they built on the connections they established as an apprentice which had provided the startup. Almost all established businessmen at *pola* used to take helpers and/or shop keepers. They themselves worked for other businessmen who were their parents, relatives or parents’ friends. Possibly unpaid at the time of being an apprentice, there were advantages later when the foundations for being a trusted and recognized member of the *pola* were already in place. Previous apprentices were able to open their own stall and were supported by their knowledgeable employers, personal connections and sometimes increased capital.

Interactions

The vendors always give customers a smiling face and ask ‘what are you looking for?’ The vendors suggest different ways in which their products can help improve the customer’s health and be economical. As one passes, it is common for a vendor to suggest a recipe to try at home as an invitation to buy what s/he sells; some others observe the passerby’s body shape or age and advice how her/his health can be improved by consuming the particular vendor’s products

If the passerby is on the heavy side, vendors suggest a not-so-common vegetable or a kind of green leaf to make a curry or a drink to lose weight. For thinner ones they offer a rare type of yam and highlights that it tastes better than potatoes. One suggested for a customer to buy organic bitter gourd simply assuming that she might have diabetes, or especially if they see someone buying candy from another vendor. A mother walking with a child was suggested a morning drink for the child made from *gotukola* (spadeleaf) which can develop the child's memory.

Most of these suggestions are from small vendors who sell smaller amounts of specialized items. As their sales are few and far between they can afford the time to talk with customers and get to know them and what they might need.

This process is the other way round with old or loyal customers. If the customer keeps coming, the vendors will remember her/his profile and monitor her/his changes. So, all information the customer provides is an investment and through those the customer will develop a link to an indigenous nutritionist, traditional culinary specialist and/or make an acquaintance who has an interest in you and your health.

I have seen how the customers ask vendors' opinions on certain health issues faced by them or a family member. Some in the *pola* say that a customer once tried for a whole week to meet a vendor as he knows that the vendor's solution will work very well based on his previous experience. If the plant, leaves, or the vegetable that cures the health problem is not available on that day the vendor promises to bring the following week, or directs the customer to another vendor who has the same product. In most cases such redirection will only strengthen the

connection between the seller and the buyer as they understand that their health is more important to the vendor than making money.

These are some moments where the imaginary conditions of economic competition are challenged by the local model of *pola* transactions. These connections between sellers and buyers can grow into relationships. One such instance is the arranged marriage between the rice seller-Ariyapala's son and the daughter of his loyal customer, Ranasinghe. It all began with an economic transaction.

Rules of Operation

While there are no formal rules, the vendors have their own understandings of how the *pola* works and what rights they should have. No one controls the standards of the awnings or structures and the vendors are allowed to do whatever they prefer. Yet, the 'commons' is also maintained: there are always ongoing dialogs and negotiations among vendors about how the structures or awnings affect others' spaces and their businesses.

Once Bandu the pumpkin seller's awning was hanging too low; it was black too and was casting a shadow on the vegetables of the vendor across the path. I overheard the vegetable seller complaining how such black material make his shops too dark and less attractive. Ever since, the owners of black awnings usually limit its use for rainy days. Usually disputes are followed by a dialog; this is usually followed by some negotiation and its implementation.

Not causing an economic damage to another member of the *pola* community is a major value that is widely respected; this governs the daily operation of *pola*. In cases of exception, the disadvantaged will bring the incident to the attention of a person respected by the community.

He, always a man, is usually a more established, middle-aged or older man who has been in this particular *pola* for a long time. Hence what the *pola* have is a common law the treasury of which is the older man. After listening to both sides, he advises the violator of the norm. Here I use norm to indicate the normal operation of the *pola*, but finally arbitrated by the elder.

I have not seen any incident go beyond this level and I have not witnessed any form of violence being used to dispense justice. Usually after such incident –or an angry or embarrassing moment- - the two parties observe a period of “no talk, no see.” After a few jokes about the incident by the others around them, the two usually get along well, again, within a few weeks. The others usually do not take a side or get involved unless the issue is brought to their particular attention; not everyone can solve conflicts so it is normally directed to one of the few leading actors.

This elder in this instance is therefore, a public figure, or public character. Unlike in formal or institutionalized management/ governance structures these characters at Kottawa Pola are not assigned by anyone nor elected. They do not have any written/documented power vested in them. The role has been thrust upon the elder due to his experience and age. There are also others, in other *polas* where a member by his deeds has become the public character and arbitrator. In some places, the physically more able, some call a thug, can also be the chief.

Although they vend right next to the permanent *pola* vendors, there are no disputes between mobile vendors and the *pola* vendors; the latter do not feel threatened as they believe in the loyalty of their customers. A *pola* vendor told me that “ohh... Those mobile vendors ... they come and go, customers know that we don’t vanish like that. We have been selling for decades and [the customers] have been buying for decades”.

Pola in Sri Lanka

In simple and standard terms, the *pola* in Sri Lanka is a local market for vegetables, fruits and other perishable food items such as fish, meat, rice, spices along with inexpensive household appliances, toys, and clothing. Functionally, this is a place of buying and selling of everyday goods. Physically, it is an arrangement of a few rows of stalls and small shop structures, made of a mixture of temporary, semi-permanent, and permanent material, concentrated in one place. *Pola* usually meets once or few times a week at a specific site that feeds one or few adjacent localities; on other days the vendors travel to similar *polas* in other localities. A group of *polas* arranged according to the days of the week, creates a travel pattern of traders between *polas* which is known as the *pola rauma*. *Polas* are found in both rural and urban areas in Sri Lanka and sometimes limits their function to wholesale or retail transactions or to a specific range of goods. Generally there is no monitoring or controlling of merchandise and the schedule; the nature of the *pola* is usually determined by the market and the way it adjusts to the changing contexts.

The lands on which *polas* are conducted are owned by individuals or local governments. The landowner charges a weekly ground rent at *polas*, i.e., for the use of the ground, while the structures are built by individual users/vendors; if the structures are provided, the provider will charge a rent monthly or annually. Utilities like water, electricity and sanitation are usually provided by the landowner or the manager (a tenderee or an agent of the local authority). Services like cleaning and parking are arranged by the vendors with or without the support of the landowner and/or manager. Food, snacks and drinks (sometimes alcohol and cigarettes too) are

provided by the local business people, residents or more creatively by a set of vendors within *pola* whose customers are other vendors. The latter is the arrangement at Kottawa Pola.

The *pola* community spends more than half the day in one place/site every week or a few times a week. Some vendor groups travel to and sell at the same set of *polas* (*pola rauma*) and spend more time with each other than with their families. This develops a life style for them in which they travel to a set of places on specific days of the week and meet with specific groups of customers/ acquaintances and friends. This gives birth to a social space and structure that is much more complex and has deeper meaning than the operation of an economic machine or a formal market.

By in large, *pola* is a mechanism, arrangement, structure and ever changing space which brings together a community of traders and vendors who circulate in a region –according to a predictable time pattern-- within local communities in the region. This meeting fulfills the everyday needs of the local households and sets up a social milieu for the locals to meet each other and their trader friends. Local residents become actors of the *pola* as customers, vendors or other service providers.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEGOTIATING TIME AND SPACE: THE POLA AT LARGE

As discussed in the introduction, *pola* is a multivalent space with different meanings for different actors such as vendors and customers. This is most evident in the contrast that state-built *polas* make. For the state it is a market, dominated by its commercial functions, and/or a traditional institution that needs updating and upgrading and/or a source of income (tax) (Chapter Two). For planners at the UDA who handles *pola* upgrading projects, it is largely a physical structure; a shelter. Yet it is a different place, process, and/or organization for *pola* actors (Chapter Three). With such multivalence and the mismatches precipitated due to the adherence to specific identities, the state misses out on the more significant aspects of the *pola*; many of these are discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter investigates the interconnectivity between *polas* and their connection to other places and times.

This chapter demonstrates that individual *polas* are not independent units; they form networks without which each *pola* cannot operate. It demonstrates how the *pola* goes beyond its site and time, weaving through different times and spaces. Each *pola* is a ‘translocality’ that is connected to other localities, even overseas, and a ‘transtemporality’ that combines aspects from different times in history and modernity (cf .Perera 2016). This last chapter also demonstrates how the *pola* is deeply rooted in the lives of the actors, and how it plays a much larger role than a market or a physical space where they earn a living.

Translocality: *Pola*'s outside connections

Broadening and further spatializing Arjun Appadurai's (1998) conceptualization of translocality which refers to the connections a place develops with other places via immigrants, particularly across national boundaries, Perera (2016) refers to translocality as a locality that influences and is influenced by many communities and places in different locales, beyond the area, region, and the nation. When adapted to current work, *pola* can be seen as a place that is reached by and reaches out to many other localities within and outside national boundaries.

The *polas* that operate on a specific site on a specific day (or days) of the week, such as Kottawa Tuesday Pola, exceed their geographical boundaries in many ways. First when the vendors reach the suppliers, manufacturers, and service providers, this act extend the *pola* activities to their locales through the flow of goods and ideas. Second, the relationship between the *polas*, constructed through flow of people, especially the trader routes. Third, as the *pola* community develops, with grouping together for various activities such as recreation and trips, these activities extend the *pola* connection to other localities.

Vendors reaching out to other localities:

Even if they only take part in one *pola*, vendors and service providers go beyond the site to organize aspects their activities which form a part of the *pola*. Moreover, the area that *pola* vendors reach in order to facilitate their livelihoods depends on the type of merchandise they sell, the scale of business and their capacity to reach. Many small-scale vendors at Kottawa Pola (mostly middle-aged and older women) walk from house to house around their places of

residence on non-*pola* days to gather marketable fruits and vegetables that are grown in urban home gardens.

Karunawathie, a middle-aged female fruit vendor who lives in Padukka (18 km from Kottawa) collects fruits grown in home gardens in her town. For this, she walks from house to house from Thursday through Monday. On Tuesdays, she brings these to Kottawa Pola by public bus. She is well known at Kottawa pola for high quality organic fruits. Karunawathie told me that it is important to take local fruits to a more urbanized place that is away from her hometown to get a good price. So, she does not vend at Padukka Pola which is the closest *pola* to her home. “Locals never pay good prices for things they find in their home gardens. The urban residents value my products more”, she said. Besides, she knows by experience that the strangers at Kottawa pay cash and never ask whether they can buy for credit (to pay later), but people at Padukka who knows her asks.

The above story indicates how Padukka is connected to Kottawa Pola via Karunawathie. It demonstrates that *pola* activity-chains connect places and institutions to others with specific meanings at different scales, but also connect to individual levels and lives. Translocality is not externally imposed, but produced by the local actors themselves.

Indika, a well-established spice vendor has spice stalls at Kottawa, Maharagama and Delkanda *polas*. He lives near Kottawa Pola and has a small mill for grinding spices. He works at *polas* for five days a week and drives his small truck to Colombo on one of the other days to buy supplies. He spends the remaining day at home grinding, packaging and labeling the merchandise to sell on the next five *pola* days. His shop and scale of operation is much larger compared to Karunawathie’s, but all his merchandise comes from one single place, he has his own transport

service, and his brother (shopkeeper) and another employee work with him to prepare and transport the merchandise.

He thus connects Kottawa Pola with other *polas* and the wholesale market in Colombo like many other vendors. Yet it is important to notice that his suppliers are mostly different from others and their manufacturers are also different from other wholesalers. Thus, at a different level, Indika's connections to Colombo, connects the *pola* with anonymous (not known to Indika) Sri Lankan and foreign manufacturers.

Nimal, my employer, also the owner and shop keeper of the largest snack stall at Kottawa and Malabe *polas*, has a much wider network of places that makes his business possible and profitable. Half of his merchandise is made and packaged at home by his family, some products that are difficult for him to make are supplied by individuals from various places in the region (Western Province). For example, *sawbora* (a coconut based home made cookie) is produced by Gamini who lives in Meegoda (about 11 km to the east). Gamini delivers these to Kottawa Pola where he also has other business contacts and buys his weekly supply of vegetables for his family.

Casava chips are produced and delivered by the well-known raw casava vendor at Kottawa Pola, Ranjan. He lives nearby Bangalawatta. He sells casava at a few *polas* while his family makes chips from the leftover casava. Ranjan brings two large bags (approx. 20 kg each) of casava chips to Kottawa Pola every other week which is enough for Nimal for both Kottawa and Malabe *polas* for two weeks.

Karali murukku, a spicy snack made with rice flour, which has the highest demand from alcohol users, is made by a family somewhat closer to Nimal's residence in Avissawella. Nimal picks this order once a week on his way back from the Colombo wholesale market where he buys factory made snacks and raw peanuts. Some of the snacks are made in China. Plastic bags are purchased from a factory in Maharagama and paper bags for both Malabe and Kotawa *polas* are



Figure 4.1: Karunawathie's links outside Kottawa Pola

home-made by a poor family which lives near Kottawa Pola.

Thus, Nimal connects Kottawa and Malabe *polas* to a range of localities, people and places within the region, outside of the region, and outside of Sri Lanka. The extended maps (Figures 4.1 to 4.3) provide a comparison of localities that are connected to Kottawa Pola via the operations of each of these vendors.



Figure 4.2: Indika's connections outside Kottawa Pola



Figure 4.3: Nimal's connections outside Kottawa Pola

However, the connections these people make are neither limited to what is mentioned here nor to what I can notice. For instance,

some vendors and their families stay a few nights at Nimal's home in Avissawella as a part of their annual trip to the hilly region of Sri Lanka. The most shocking incident was when my own employer, the snack seller invited me to join him on the next trip to India (his 4th annual trip) on which he plans to stay at places Buddhist pilgrims visit. He knows these places through a Sri Lankan monk who lives in India. His intent is

to wonder around cities, sell valuables that he would take from Sri Lanka and buy Chennai Sarees with that money. Upon return, he expects to sell these to his vendor-friends at Kottawa and Malabe *polas*. I attempted to combine a few extended maps based on the information I gathered from a few vendors I interviewed to map out the scale of the ‘translocal’ reach of Kottawa pola. (Figure 4.5)

The findings question many assumptions about the *pola*. Most significantly, my observations clearly question the idea that *pola* is a place where rural produce is sold to urban people. As evident from above examples, much of the products sold are also urban, including the fruits that Karunawathie sells. Also, rural produce get to *polas* via wholesale markets in Colombo and Meegoda. The *pola* has not only survived the modernization of the urban, but it has also contributed to it and influenced it. No other



Figure 4.5: composite map for the creation of translocality through individual connections



Figure 4.4: A group of business partners sharing some gossip during work

the boundaries of the region and nation.

institutions, *pola* serves particular types of socialization that new urban institutions cannot. The *pola* is an essential component of the modern city in Sri Lanka. Most significantly, the *pola* is no more a set of individual weekly markets. They are connected to each other and many other organizations and people beyond

Pola in connection to other *polas* - *Pola Rauma* (Circuits of *polas*):

Most visible connections that take the *pola* beyond its physical site are the routes between *polas* in the region through which the weekly schedule of each vendor is arranged. One of the very first studies conducted on the *pola* by Jackson in 1977 attempts to develop a pattern out of these routes which she calls ‘trader circuits.’ She argues that if two *polas* belong to the same circuit, it is reasonable to expect the same set of vendors at both *polas*. My experience with Kottawa, Malabe and ten other *polas* connected to those is somewhat different. There are many factors that goes into a vendor’s selection of a set of *polas* for his weekly route which they call the ‘*pola rauma*’ (lit: circle of *polas*). Hence these *raum*as are diverse. Some of the factors are:

a) Day of the *pola*:

Pola days have to be compatible with other activities for it to be feasible for a vendor to include in his route. In other words, the weekly routine of the person and the family and the *pola* schedule should be compatible. For example, a vendor whose daughter has to be taken to a medical clinic every Saturday removed Padukka *pola* from his route. Harsha, who sells medicinal herbs and greens at Kottawa *Pola* also works as a Revenue Officer at the Ceylon Electricity Board. He spends three days at his formal job including Saturday, two days at *polas* (Sunday and Tuesday) and takes the other two week days off. Kottawa *pola* on Tuesday and Delkanda *Pola* on Sunday are the only *polas* he can include in his routine, in order to save both jobs.

Thus, it is safe to say that the *polas* included in one's *pola rauma* depends on his individual life schedule, mainly the schedule of other livelihood activities, and that of *polas*. Hence, different vendors have different *pola raumas*.

b) The product cycle and the stock management:

More than a quarter of vendors at Kottawa Pola considers it a 'stock clearance' *pola*; meaning that Kottawa Pola is the place where the vendors sell whatever is left of their weekly stocks after a large Sunday or Monday *pola* at Maharagama, Athurugiriya, Delkanda, Malabe, Homagama, or two of them. Hence the *polas* within one circuit are also not equal. This is a very sensitive matter ignored by planners who suggest developing only a few selected *polas* justified by statistics and formulas on population density of the area and the distance to other *polas*. Such calculations cannot account for this diversity.

When operating with a slim profit margin, the *pola* vendors cannot afford to lose a part of their stock every week. As most of *pola* products have a shorter life cycle, especially vegetables and fruits it is important to have a *pola* that helps reducing waste by providing a small market within a reasonable distance, before the product-life ends. Most helpful is a smaller scale *pola* that takes place on the first or the second day following a larger-scale *pola*, within a reasonable distance. Kottawa Pola fits the bill. Hence, this 'stock clearance *pola*' makes the difference between success and failure for the vendors.

The smaller scale of Kottawa Pola allows vendors to find it a market for remaining stock without running out of supplies unexpectedly. This is also a reason why the attendance of vendors at Kottawa Pola is not consistent. Shanthi, who sells fruits along with his son, explained that she

only come to Kottawa if there is a considerable load of fruits left after Homagama Pola on Sunday. During my first few weeks at Kottawa Pola, I perceived non-attendance as a bad quality of *pola* actors and it appears as if they would disappoint their customers by not showing up on some *pola* days. When I understood from vendors' vantage point, it became clear that Kottawa Pola plays a very specific role for most vendors and the floating vendors and their readjusting the places of vending at morning tea time (See chapter 3) are highly meaningful. These provide identity to the *pola*. Although these actors and processes cannot be found in every *pola*, all *polas* have such some specificity, flexibility and openness.

c) Location:

Location has many more dimensions than proximity. Vendors consider a set of complex factors in addition to the distance between their place of residence and the *polas*. For Karunawathie above, the more urban location Kottawa provides higher value for her fruits. Also her 'outsiderness' to Kottawa allows her to maintain a healthy distance with her customers so she does not have to worry about people wanting to buy for credit. For Nimal, Kottawa Pola is where he has established strong connections with his suppliers. After two decades, the suppliers trust him and deliver his orders to the stall itself. He also considers the location of other suppliers from whom he picks stocks such as *kerali murukku*. He prefers the suppliers who are located on his daily route to *polas* from home; this minimizes the transportation cost and makes it comfortable

His weekly visit to Kottawa Pola is also a trip to collect supplies for Sunday and Wednesday *polas* at Malabe. An older greens vendor told me that she once had a habit of taking part in a certain *pola* (she did not disclose her identity or the places) because that is where her daughter

lives. Her weekly visit to see a grandson became more economical as she did it via the *pola*. She goes on the *pola* day, vends and spends the night at her daughter's. The trip, especially the bus fare and gifts, is funded through her work at *pola*. Thus location means much more than the distance to other *polas* or to the place of residence.

d) Transport facilities:

The *pola raumas* are supported by the availability, convenience and economy of transport among *polas*. As explained in Chapter Three, Ruwan's truck (lorry) transports stocks of merchandise and equipment between three *polas* at Kottawa, Athurugiriya and Homagama. Yet this is not the most common method of transport anymore; only 15 out of 120 sit-in vendors use Ruwan's truck. With the introduction of both smaller heavy-duty vehicles and small bank loans to finance the purchase of vehicles, most vendors bought trucks. 'Dimo Batta,' (Tata Ace HT), a smaller truck of the size between a lorry and a van, is popular among lower-middle class businessmen who use a truck for both personal, family transport and business trips.

In fact, buying a smaller truck, three-wheeler or a van became a part of the success model at *pola* and in the 'informal' economic sector in general. Most of the small vendors who could not afford or arrange to, or did not want to, buy a vehicle also started to have vendor friends who goes to the same *polas* and/or lives close by. Also, it is not common for females to drive heavier vehicles in Sri Lanka, but a considerable portion of *pola* vendors is female. Some comparatively rich vendors have turned this into an income method. At Kottawa most of the transport arrangements are personally negotiated with vehicle owners, who do have extra room left on their vehicles after loading all their merchandise and equipment.

P.P. Ranjith, who goes by PP has one such truck which transports goods and equipment between Maharagama and Kottawa *polas*. Most vendors leave their goods at PP's custody and take a public bus home with the plan of meeting PP at the next *pola*. At a more personal level, some vendors arrange to take a ride from and get the goods and equipment transported by a fellow vendor if he lives close by or on the same route. Nimal (snack seller) and Jayasinghe have a similar arrangement in which Jayasinghe pays Nimal in potatoes and onions. These personal and community transport arrangements play a significant role in vendors deciding which *polas* to include in their weekly *pola rauma*.

e) Inheritance and sense of belonging:

Most shop spaces have belonged to the same family for generations. When a *pola* runs out of shop spaces and open land to build more structures passing the 'ownership' becomes a way in which the entry to *pola* is controlled or discouraged, although not intentionally. For example, Seelawathie entered Kottawa Pola following her mother in law who had a betel shop. Kumara, a young male vendor ended up owning his father's tobacco stall at Kottawa when he took over its management while his father was terminally ill. Both Seelawathie and Kumara still revisit the memories of previous generation, especially with older customers who used to know the original vendors.

Some vendors choose to continue the legacy of their parents or respectable adults who showed them the path to success at *pola*. Bandu a popular pumpkin seller began as a helper at his father's pumpkin stand at Maharagama Pola and then became the owner of the stall after his passing. He then expanded his business to Delkanda and Kottawa *polas* by buying new stalls at both places. After two decades when he decided to shrink his operation, i.e., after his kids grew up to be

earning adults, but could not let go of Maharagama where he began his life and Kottawa Pola where he started his own stall without his father's support. These personal values and memories attached to places and *pola* communities play a larger role in deciding individual *pola* circles.

f) Type of customers in relation to the type of merchandise:

Not all products are equally attractive to all customers; the ability to read the customers as a group and as individuals is a key skill that enables a vendor to succeed at *pola*. When he began his career as a shopkeeper of a textile shop at Delkanda Pola, Nimal began to understand the difference between the customers of his hometown (Avisawella) and of Colombo. After a few years of exposure, he also learned about the products that can be sold to urban customers at a higher profit margin. After starting to bake and make snacks, Nimal chose to come to Colombo, travelling 40 km, to get a market and a better price he can never get for homemade snacks in his part of the country. After focusing on a customer group that he wants to cater, the next challenge was to develop a customer base that is loyal to him. Nimal has developed two such groups at Kottawa and Malabe.

Within each group he knows the customers who have concerns about diabetes, use of MSG (Monosodium Glutamate) and/or vegetable oil. Nimal's business is thriving and at Malabe he makes a few times the income from Kottawa. As he has demonstrated the ability to manage a larger shop (at Malabe), transport and a production cycle, I asked why he does not begin shops in other larger *polas*. He responded: "it is not the size of the *pola* that matters, it is the name I developed over 25 years among the people in these two areas [Kottawa and Malabe], Many people do not buy if I do not guarantee that I made a certain product with my own hands." Once these groups of customers are established Nimal's business is not footloose to move to any *pola*

or market. When planners justify their decisions to intervene in to only a few *polas* in one region, these are the overlooked local connections on which *pola* thrives.

Tony, the most strategic vegetable vendor at Kottawa (in my estimation) has developed a very loyal group of customers who comes to *pola* in search of him for they know that his vegetables are well sorted (to remove bad ones), cleaned and carefully transported from Meegoda SEC. He brings a large variety of vegetables that cannot be found at the common vegetable stalls which rely on Colombo wholesale market. He caters to a small group of upper class customers established over the years Tony has spent at Kottawa Pola, who completely depend on him for their weekly vegetable requirement.

His prices are a bit higher but the quality is guaranteed. Tony's success depends on his understanding of the customer needs and values, but there is no space for many Tonys. Therefore it requires a lot more creativity to think beyond and differently to develop such small markets within *pola*. Once such a loyal group of customers is established among the larger group of *pola* customers, this plays a large role in deciding which *polas* to give up and which *polas* to continue.

g) Changing aspirations and life changes:

Pola circles or circuits are changed according to the changes in personal lives. Karunawathie (organic fruits), Caroline (greens) and Sugath (dried fish) are

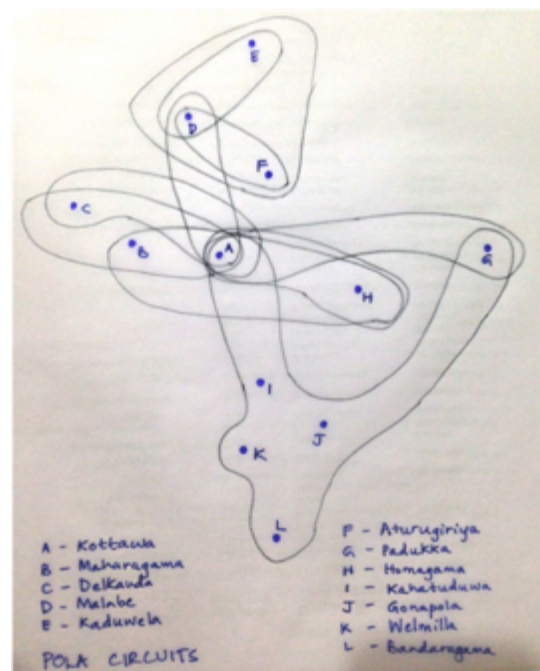


Figure 4.6: The *pola raumas* (circuits) in the region

good examples of this phenomenon. Both Caroline and Karunawathi reduced the number of *polas* they visited as they get older, whereas Sugath dropped Padukka and Athurugiriya *polas* when he started a regular dried fish shop at his own neighborhood. Looking at such stories with enormous individual agency to continue, expand, shrink and/or discontinue it is impossible to see any predictable patterns of rigidly set *pola* circuits.

In sum, with increasing mobility (increasing number of roads, highways, public transport coverage and access to vehicle financing) and complex life styles of both vendors and customers, the exercise of individual agency and its intensity have both increased and expanded (to new areas of operation) almost to a level where there is no pattern or formula can be formulated to explain how *pola* circuits are operated and organized. The diagram (Figure 4.6) illustrates the *pola raumas* (circuits) that are made by the movement of some vendors I met at Kottawa and Malabe *polas*. Some circles are popular than others. Nonetheless, the above factors are fundamental in the vendor's determination of which circuits of *polas* they join and/or create.

Pola expands as a community:

There are many other ways in which *polas* grow and maintain its community aspect; we briefly discussed the vendor group which stays at Nimal's during their annual trip. However, the activities, values and processes that bring the community together and/or expand it are organized at personal, small group or at community level.

a) Personal and small (closed) group level:

The personal connections between *pola* actors (vendors, customers, support service providers and many more) grow and change with time as in any other community. These interactions are

based on numerous factors including helping each other to overcome personal misfortunes, business partnerships, sharing life experience and advice, sharing the same *pola* rauma and/or same route to go home, common interests, similar taste and common challenges. (Figure 4.7)

Soma, who has been a vendor at Kottawa Pola for 27 years told me that the *pola* community is her true family and her *pola* visits are mostly for the purpose of socializing with this happy family. Her favorite young members of *pola* include Indika and Manoj. When inquired about



Figure 4.7: A fun moment of socializing at Kottawa Pola

her special attachment to *pola*, Indika shared a small story about Soma.

Few years ago, aunty Soma did not show up on few consecutive *polas* [a few weeks]. We decided to visit her place to check on her. She was very sick and condemned by her daughter in law. We took her to a doctor and kept visiting until she recovered. She never missed a single *pola* day after that. We became very close friends since then, and we see that she is much happier at *pola* than at her own house. Now understand this very carefully, sister! We do not do anything special for her, we all gather here on Tuesdays and have fun teaching each other, cracking jokes and discussing life issues sometimes only to laugh at them. We cannot solve everything, but we can share... this is the *pola* spirit you [the researcher] must see if you are to understand this for real! (Author's translation)

Indika also shared other ways in which they maintain the small community/group relationships within the larger *pola* community. They face challenges together by organizing *seettu* (see chapter 3), visiting each other's families during Sinhala New Year festival, helping at hard times (financially and emotionally), supporting each other during special events in their lives (religious activities, weddings and other celebrations) and by organizing small trips, pilgrimage or social events. These expand their community by adding their individual families and circles of friends

to core *pola* community. Thus the *pola* community reaches society and spaces beyond *pola* site through this expansion. They rely on social capital than economic resources for these.

b) Community level:

To explain community at *pola*, I will draw examples from both Malabe and Maharagama *polas* as the community organization aspect of Kottawa Pola is largely limited to personal connections and temporary arrangements at present.

Malabe Pola as a community organizes a *dansela* (an event providing free food for locals and pilgrims on the most significant Buddhist holiday: Vesak) on full moon day of May. Funds for *dansela* are collected on every *pola* day throughout the year, in addition to the monthly membership fee. The event requires a larger amount of money, labor and time, which is supplied by the Malabe Pola community and their individual connections (families, caterers, food suppliers) outside the *pola*. Annually this brings together a larger amount of willing people from outside the *pola* for a totally non-economic activity.

Similarly, Maharagama Pola community organizes trips to religious places, events of cultural importance such as *gammadu*; an overnight dance festival that is organized to wish well to a certain group of people or a locality to overcome a hard situation or a bad time. They have also built a few houses with the funds collected from *pola* in Pathagama, Kelaniya area, and donated to a few very poor families. Such activities that are beyond daily operation of the *pola*, connects the *pola* community to the locality and the locals who are specialized in other forms of livelihood (i.e.: traditional dance, catering, event organizing). Every event expands the reach of *pola* community, strengthens the bonds between its own members and enriches its collective journey

with colorful experience. Most of the research on the *pola* imagines it within (and secondary to) administrative boundaries, such as towns, district and villages. Yet, as evident above, the *pola* is a translocality that exceeds such limits and cannot be contained within such geographic limits. This is a major reason for the failure of state and planner's interventions.

***Pola* beyond singular time: Transtemporality**

Pola is neither traditional, nor modern; it is not on a journey 'from traditional to modern' either. As explained by Perera (2016), "Space cannot be purely defined within a compartmentalized time zone, but the time of the place is made up of a combination of contemporary, residual, and emergent spaces." At the *pola* too, one cannot help but notice how its actors continuously negotiate and redefine the "shape" of the time they live in. In doing so, they challenge the concept of one place, event or space belonging to or representing a 'singular time' at a given moment. Most outsider readings (authorities, planners and scholars) seem to believe that the *pola* is stuck in one time (usually in the past and tradition) and desperately needs help or guidance from outside, or from above (the powerful) to move forward (to where the rest of the world is). My reading of the *pola* does not confirm this outside-in view.

In this half of the chapter, I investigate how the *pola* creates its modernity from within. It explores and examines how the *pola* is creating its contemporary self as they live it through it. I pay special attention to the processes through which it is negotiating multiple times in creating its present. While I build on the concept of modernity (Appadurai 1998; Kapoor 2008; Chatterjee 2004), I will also discuss the clash or the incompatibility between the 'multiple modernities' and the construction of "*Hybrid Modernities*" (Hosagrahar 2005). This highlights the different presents and futures for the *pola* imagined by the *pola* community and the authorities and their

planners. Revealing this gap opens up room for future research on improving the ways in which outsiders intervene (or not) into *pola*.

When I began to work at Kottawa Pola, I noticed how difficult it is for my middle-class mind to believe that the people and activities at *pola* share the same time and space I live in (cf Perera 2016). I recall some eye-opening instances worth sharing.

Lalith (36) a vegetable vendor once took a picture of me while posing for a picture I took of him and his stall perhaps only to tease me by saying that he would post it on FaceBook along with the tag-line “ lady researcher at our *pola*!” First he is social media savvy. Moreover, unlike the days when the subject was considered unable to do the researcher what the latter does to the subject, Lalith was able to treat me at his same level, in this regard. Unlike the old days, when the visitor held a camera and not the subject, Lalith could, with a picture of me, tease (or even threaten) me, praise me, criticize me, or do whatever else on social media. I witnessed Kumara (29), a tobacco vendor, sharing YouTube videos he watches on his phone with his older neighbors (another betel vendor and a tobacco vender), to add some spice to their good old style discussion on current national politics. They are up-to-date on current affairs along many aspects including technology, politics and their economic activities as much as any other group of citizens. (Figure 4.8)

The above incidents and experiences made me realize that the *pola* community is not stuck anywhere in the past or another place without being able to see alternative life choices, nor does it need outsiders including the authorities and planners to determine its modernity or the future. It also occurred that my modernity is not more modern compared to *pola* people’s modernity, but just different. Hence, there can be many ways in which modernity is ‘negotiated’ and these modernities cannot be located on a linear trajectory. Thus, I will explore the ways in which *pola*

negotiates its modernity. Among many methods employed in such negotiation, I can clearly identify the following: The *pola* adapts its role and content to fit changing contexts, in its own ways; it incorporates most up-to-date technology; members of the *pola* community incessantly change their worldviews to create a knowledge base that works for them and finally, they negotiate modernities imposed on them. I will expand these ways in which *pola* achieves ‘Transtemporality’ in this section.

Changing the role and content of *pola* to fit the changing context:

As discussed in Chapter Three, Kottawa Pola which began as a wholesale *pola* collected local agricultural produce, mainly betel, and sold to wholesalers, was transformed into the retail *pola* of today. This neither happened naturally nor was controlled/managed/guided by an authority. The changes in the form and meaning of *pola* is the result of thousands of individual and group actions and decisions that shaped through the responses to changing conditions and attempts to achieve their aspirations by changing their actions and the socio-economic and political landscapes.

With the lack of demand from the troubled northern region of the country, Kottawa Pola responded to the rising demand from the new wave of urban residents who migrated from rural areas to work in Colombo. With the rise of large housing projects such as Mattegoda and Rukmalgama and the trend of growing housing supply continued by the original residents at individual level clarified the accuracy and the aptness of the new direction the actors of Kottawa Pola took to make it a retail *pola*.

According to Soma, she began her fruit and greens stall 27 years ago, Kottawa Pola was half its today's size. The structures were built along a single path that ran from the middle of the site to the Malabe Road entrance. By 1995, new structures of more retail vendors had grown from the middle of the site in the opposite direction and created a second entrance from Athurugiriya Road. This was also the time when the *pola* transformed from a betel wholesale market where the betel farmers sold their produce to wholesalers from Jaffna into a more diversified retail *pola*. During this change, most of the farmers left the *pola*, while a few transformed themselves into retail vendors. Much of the expansion was caused by new small-scale vendors.

However I found a 'human ruin' that failed to refine his role with the changing *pola*. Although he has "failed" in a formal sense, he is still maintained by the *pola* community and is a part of it. On my second day at *pola* a drunk and smelly old man wearing a very dirty sarong and a shirt approached me asking if I knew who he is. When I said no he said that he is the future Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. He went on explaining, how the current Prime Minister invited him to his residence asked him if he likes to be the next Prime Minister. He agreed, but there was an issue; he had to agree to wear a trouser. He promised to return soon with a trouser but never went back. When I laughed I noticed

that I was not alone, many were listening to his story and as he was walking towards me, a woman asked him to keep distance from the stranger (me)



Figure 4.9: 'Prime Minister', Premaratne

because his mouth smells. There was no sign of discomfort caused by her statement and I realized that he is not a stranger for them and vice versa. I started asking around about him while he continued his speech making half of the *pola* laugh with sarcasm and the other half with pity. (Figure 4.9)

As I later found out, Premaratne Amarasekara (in his 80's), or the "Prime Minister" as identified by some vendors, usually hangs out at Kottawa Pola and *handiya* entertaining the vendors and customer with his political jokes. He had been a landowner belonging to the family that owns the Kottawa Pola site. He was a broker at Kottawa Pola, a middleman who bought produce from the farmers and sold to wholesalers for profit. The produce is largely betel, but also include rice and vegetables and cocoanuts and Premaratne and a few others did not let farmers to sell their produce directly to wholesalers. When *pola* changed in to a retail outfit, he could not fit into any new role.

As the rumor goes, he then became a fulltime alcoholic and a political supporter who was strategically used by a local politician. He was eventually disowned by his family and has become very weak and mentally unsound; He is and too old now to do any job. He started living on the streets and sleep in an empty *pola* structure at night. The *pola* vendors feed him and provide him some company on *pola* days; some give him a purpose by asking him to collect old newspapers from nearby houses, so the vendors can buy them from him to wrap merchandise. Hence, without thinking he also participates in a recycling process.

Some members of the *pola* community secretly laugh at how he slid down from being a landowner to a beggar; the others consider him as a source of entertainment or as a reminder of the changing nature of life. When I wanted to help him, many vendors asked me to not give him

any money which he will use to consume alcohol, and I was advised to give him some food instead. This made me realize their empathy towards the Prime Minister. In a way, he was dropped when *pola* changed its face, but was eventually found and caressed by *pola* community when he was helpless and needed the warmth and support of a community. This reveals ability of *pola* to keep re-shaping the ways in which it deals with the changing contexts and resources (material, spaces and humans) producing its own modernity.

I witnessed how the *pola* community perceived and resourcefully used my own presence; when I revealed my purpose, Nimal who saw the opportunity of having a shopkeeper offered me a volunteer position at *pola*. Later when his vendor friends offered me to work at their shops he started to pay me a small salary to encourage me to work for him. He knew that I was not going to work there forever, yet it did not stop him from making use of the human resource that was available at the moment, for a cheaper price. From de Certeau's (1984) standpoint, the *pola* community operates through tactics; it does not have the luxury of making long-term strategies.

(Figure 4.10)

As I went around *pola*, interviewing vendors, most of them made use of my trips around *pola* to



Figure 4.10: Nimal, relaxing while his newly found shop keeper (myself) is busy at work

send messages, goods to their friends who are located in other parts of the *pola*. The tea maker

used me as a ‘delivery girl’ to send tea to my boss. I also made use of that new assignment to know and have conversation with a few more people. Nimal’s neighbor Dhanapala does not like the tea made by the tea maker lady at *pola*. He frequently sent me to buy tea from a nearby store, which gave me an opportunity and a reason to hang out at Mahathun’s teashop at Pola Handiya and observe how the *handiya* is connected to the *pola*.

I kept learning the tactic of ‘tapping into the resources available at the moment to get the immediate task done’ and also to learn more about the *pola* through the unexpected opportunities and experiences the *pola* community provided me. For me, their capacity to change from within to get the best out of changing contexts and resources is the key to their survival and modernization. It is continuously engaged in a processes of changing themselves and the surroundings (available resources including people, time, material, events) to better fit in and to fit those resources to better serve their individual journeys.

Incorporating most up-to-date technology:

Kottawa Pola has no electricity supply. Until recently it was not an issue as the *pola* had ended before dark. Increasing traffic jams on high-level road between Colombo and Kottawa on weekday evenings have extended the peak hour. Most evening customers of Kottawa Pola cannot reach the *pola* (on Tuesdays) before dark. The vendors have responded to this difference by staying a few extra hours. During my third week at the *pola* there were 24 stalls that stayed open until late, but only half of them were individually lit. They were lit by electricity drawn from car batteries of personal vehicles parked behind the stalls. Others depended on neighbor’s lights. Within the next three weeks the number rose to 36; by the 11th week it was 41.

I was fortunate to experience the *pola* during this period of transition and witness dialogues among vendors about the changes that were needed at the time; I heard the below conversation during my third week. This was between Ranji who stopped at Nimal's stall at Kottawa on his way to the toilet to catch up on an old plan. Ranji is a vegetable vendor at Kottawa, a rice vendor at Malabe and a good friend of Nimal.

Ranji: Nimal, what's up with our plan?

Nimal: Cannot wait for everybody; let us carry on with the vendors on this side. [Ranji and Nimal both occupied structures on the same row.] I will bring the 'thing' next week...

Ranji: Ok, how many agreed to take part now?

Nimal: Dhanapala, Premasiri, Lalee, Manoj and you have already agreed. I can give up to 80 connections if we get the battery. Let us begin with the few who agreed and others will join. I need Rs. 9000 to get the battery. I already have the power inverter; you don't have to pay for it. You guys will have to buy bulbs and cables long enough from here to your stall. If I get money for the battery, I will buy it soon and keep it in my truck and will charge it every week from home; my car battery is not strong enough for more than 3-4 bulbs.

Ranji: hmmm, I remember that part. 9000..., right? Let's see!

It became clear to me that this was a part of an ongoing discussion and I was curious to know how the gap between lack of electricity and the growing need to stay after dark in negotiated. I followed up the 'project' for two months during which time the group got smaller and smaller, and came down to three stalls of Nimal, Lalee and Dhanapala. They then postponed the

purchasing of the
extra battery.
Instead Nimal,



Lalee and Dhanapala used Nimal's power inverter and his car battery to light the three shops.
(Figure 4.11)

After two more weeks Nimal suggested that they should shift to LED lights to save more power; after demonstration of the lighting system (at a smaller scale) there were more requests to join the 'lighting club' and Nimal kept promoting to buy a battery with more capacity just for lighting. The deal was to share the cost of the battery while Nimal keeps recharging it and providing electricity for those who paid for the battery. The strategy will make Nimal an owner of a larger battery and others will receive power at night as long as Nimal comes to *pola*.

While the pros and cons of his suggestion were debated, some vendors kept exploring alternatives. Some bought carry-on lamps that are re-charged during the day using solar power; some bought rechargeable lamps that provided light for 4-5 hours when fully charged; some others went old style and filled an empty coconut (usually the shells of the coconuts they drank during the day) with kerosene oil and put a dry stick covered with cotton strands as the wick to create a lamp that is completely organic, but used only once. More importantly everyone kept trying, exploring alternatives, and improving the found options. More new and old technology was incorporated everyday refining the details of the design. Still there was a lot to figure out but no one worried about finalizing a design. Every Tuesday evening, few hours before the dark, the common topic at *pola* was the possible new lighting options; some worried about which technology to use while others (smaller scale actors) tried to figure out from whom to ask for help in regard to lighting their stalls. Sharing was always on the table, but the conditions of sharing had to be decided by each group of individuals before collaboration. The finalizing of many other details was delayed until a true need occurs.

At individual level, almost everyone keeps trying new technology or new arrangements of old (and new) material to diversify their businesses not only to expand the customer base, but also to keep their lives interesting, more importantly to keep alive the passion they have for what they do. Susantha, the in-house DVD vendor at Kottawa Pola, keeps updating his knowledge on new international movies, new technology of copying or downloading movies and writing them on DVDs and many other aspects of his business. During my field work, he introduced a portable DVD player to his stall which allowed the customers to check the quality of the media before they buy. (Figure 4.12)



Figure 4.12: Susantha's latest technological improvement, the DVD player.

Also, Susantha continuously re-classifies his collection of DVDs. This classification comes and refines through Susantha's study of customer behavior. According to him, male customers over 50 like x-rated (adults only) movies, while the young males like

action and thriller movies. More surprisingly, middle aged women have a propensity to watch South Indian ghost stories based on Hindu mythologies in addition to their common taste in documentaries on Buddhist rituals and pilgrimage. Susantha has a cardboard box for each category and some categories such as x-rated movies are displayed only at request. He clarified that this particular act is based on his social responsibility as a father of two young kids. He

makes sure that under aged *pola* customers are not exposed to movies with sexually explicit content. This cultural filtering demonstrates the subtle ways in which the *pola* constructs its own version of modernity and morality that is based on a complex set of values that are broader than the expectation of business strategies or profit.

Hybridizing belief systems and worldviews:

Chuti Malli (Ratnasiri) who started as a helper at a *pola* and now owns a successful wholesale and retail vegetable business at Malabe Pola and 3 buses that provide regional transport is a well-respected public character. He is also the treasurer of Suhada Eksath Welanda Samithiya (lit: cordial united merchants association) at Malabe Pola. He is also famous among *pola* communities at Malabe, Maharagama, Delkanda and Kottawa and is considered a model of success worth following by anyone who begins a career at *pola*. His principles, worldview and knowledge are something that everyone at *pola* wishes to understand and acquire.

My employer, Nimal, once asked for Chuti Malli's guidance on consulting an astrologer; some members of Nimal's family were sick for a few months and he suspected that was a bad omen caused by the layout of his house or a curse made by a neighbor. Chuti Malli visited Nimal's place with his personal astrologer and made a few recommendations based on *vasthu sashtra* to change the location of a door and demolish two walls of his house to overcome unexplained issues. The next day at *pola* I asked Nimal about his belief in astrology,

I never believed those personally, but just look at Chuti Malli ... He never failed at anything he did according to his astrologer's guidance. This time, since I cannot

understand the cause of the bad time my family is undergoing, I thought there is no harm in seeking help from unseen [supernatural] forces. (Author's Translation)

As discussed before, Nimal is also the person who introduced the most up-to-date technology to provide electricity to Kottawa Pola. Based on that, I originally perceived him as a person who keeps an eye on new technological changes that can benefit his journey. Thus in my mind he was portrayed as a very progressive and a comparatively modern character at *pola*.

The revelation of his new belief in astrology made me rethink about such characterization. Is he traditional? Does this newly found belief in astrology erase his bravery in applying new technology to his old business? It was puzzling to my middle-class westernized version of modernity and western education based world view until I came to terms with the parallel existence of his hybrid version of worldview and the modernity that he employs. In fact, the modernity at *pola* is made up of a combination of contemporary, residual, and emergent spaces (Perera 2016) shaped through hybrid worldviews.

Negotiating imposed modernities:

Two common arguments made for the re-development of *pola* are framed by the two main forms of modernity promoted by the state. The modernity that frames and celebrates tradition encourages the state support for traditional institutions while the construction of new physical structures (which are imported symbols of the modernity in the so called developed world) are compatible with the values of the middle class who appreciates the 'modern look' of their cities. Unfortunately, the ingenious modernity that emerges from the needs of diverse populations who are operated through personalized individual perceptions of modernity is not compatible with above two types of modernity. As it is hard to understand, imagine, predict or control, the state

has no idea on how to deal with these local ways of achieving modernity or with ordinary people who invent such ways. Using the re-structuring of Maharagama Pola, in this section, I discuss how these imposed and grounded modernities clashed giving birth to numerous tactics through which the *pola* achieved its own version of modernity, overpowering the imposed modernity.

Between September 2014 and May 2015, spending LKR 40 million, the UDA built ‘a modern long-lasting steel structure’ with the support of Sri Lankan Air force which supplied construction labor and engineering services for Maharagama Pola. (Figure 4.13) (Project progress presentation, UDA, 2015) The original *pola* was there for more than 60 years; its site was owned and managed by the Maharagama Municipal Council from 1972, and the community organization at Maharagama Pola was established in 1982.



Figure 4.13: Maharagama Pola under construction (Source: UDA)

Maharagama Pola faced the threat of losing its land for a so called ‘modern’ development since early 2000’s. For instance, in 2004, the municipality tried to relocate the *pola* elsewhere to build a modern high-end mall.

When resistance rose up, one solution was to build a 5-storey shopping complex with the basement allocated to *pola* vendors. The municipality and local politicians were highly supported

by the local elite businessmen, and the *pola* community diversified their tactics of resistance from religious curses to face-to-face meetings with the most powerful person in the country to resist this alliance of local government and capital.

Thirteen members and officers of *pola* community organized a meeting with the president of Sri Lanka, arranged through a provincial council minister. This meeting was organized after exercising their agency in many ways including pickets, rallies and most importantly multiple forms of local religious activity to curse the mayor and officers. They informed the President that the local authority is about to evict the *pola* community.

The conflict between the *pola* and the municipality continued, but its face changed over time due to the governments change and multiple business groups becoming interested in finding the ‘optimal use’ of the *pola* site by allotting it to more powerful businessmen. Much recently, the President, possibly using his political wisdom to convert a local conflict into an opportunity, ordered to expand his brother’s (Minister of Urban Development) urban regeneration scheme to Maharagama, restructuring Maharagama *pola*.

Within months, the UDA took over the ownership of the *pola* land and an adjacent land both previously owned by the Municipal Council and immediately embarked on a *pola* re-development project. In September 2014, the *pola* was moved to a temporary location along the main road and the construction began in October. The *pola* community was proud of all the attention they received from the national government until the national level planners started their experiment of creating a local *pola* without a locally grounded knowledge on operation, management or social dynamics; they neither received the full support of the municipality. The *pola*-community realized that the ways in which the planners of national scale operate and think

is very far from how they operate and view the *pola*.. During the design stage, *pola* community requested separate stalls and many other elements that were essential to operate *pola* functions successfully.

Yet, there was no room for negotiation between the Secretary of the Ministry who was the chief officer in-charge of the project and the biological brother of the President then and the project planners on the design. Thus no flexibility was offered by the planner's to the *pola* community. Planners were advised to build a massive shelter with a large roof, with references made to similar structures in China, Korea and Australia. His guidance was supplemented by weekly site visits, biweekly meetings to assess the progress and many other instruments of close monitoring. There was absolutely no need for the authorities to evaluate the old structure or the specific details of the operation of Maharagama Pola; because the structure was expected to strictly follow the design of the *pola* structures that were restructured elsewhere in the country through the same program. Thus, the planners were imposing a symbol of pseudo-Western modern city they imagined based on what the politicians imported.

The *pola* community was not able communicate their aspirations regarding the *pola* space they dream to have. Given the conditions passed by military involvement and the strong influence of the 'Rajapaksa regime' (see Perera and Dissanayake 2015), *pola* vendors decided to play a submissive for the moment hoping that they would figure something out once the *pola* is handed over to them. As Indika mentioned

It was clear they had money to help us...we wanted them spend those funds on us, not on some political Jilmart.[colloquial term meaning some political hypocrisy related to a development project that ends up being loss for the intended beneficiaries.] We were sure that we can handle it from there... (Author's translation)

Sooner than expected, two alien shelters with expensive massive high roofs, separate fish stall unit, a toilet, washing station, a security hut and a set of solar power street lamps were dumped on them. (Figure 4.14) The designers imagined one large *pola* space but separated according to products: The main structure is for vegetable and fruit sellers, a separate structure for fish with tiled counters that can be easily cleaned and another for dry food items such as dried fish, spices and rice. The empty polished floors of the two big structures (that makes the main area) are divided into smaller squares marked by yellow lines drawn on the floor.



Figure 4.14: Shelters provided for Maharagama Pola

The municipality was asked to distribute the shop spaces among the selected vendors. According to some vendors the local authority used its powers to allocate the best spots in the new structure (with better potential to attract more customers) to its favorite merchants. The leader of the *pola* community had to negotiate with the municipality. As the municipality somewhat sold the ideas behind distribution to him, from the vendor's side he failed to convince the authorities

of their needs, and lost trust in him. Some said that he was bribed by the Municipal Council, by allocating a strategic spot for him on the vending floor. The unity among the vendors were lost in the process.

The spaces were allocated and re-allocated using different mechanisms to fit different demands from the municipality's favorite and not-so-favorite *pola* groups. (Figure 4.15) In fact, no one

(except fish vendors) wanted to follow the zones created according to products. This in fact is the opposite of how *polas* are generally organized. The mismatch between what was provided and how *pola* operates, combined with corruption evident in the questionable space allocation and reallocation, resulted in the elimination of some smaller scale vendors. Much disappointment was caused by not-so-transparent space allocation strategies and multiple splits in *pola* community due to misinterpretations and miscommunication about the process of spot/stall allocation.

There were many conflicts between numerous actors, outside and within the *pola* community, including between the municipality and the UDA. Although built on municipality's land, its ownership was appropriated by the UDA. If the municipality wants the management rights, it ought to pay UDA the construction costs of the structures it neither asked nor designed. After a gloomy period and paying half the cost, the Municipal Council gained the management rights of *pola* with the promise of full ownership once the debt to UDA is cleared.

The vendors were finally permitted to conduct *pola* at the new facility but were subjected to many rules



Figure 4.15: Markers on the ground indicates the multiple turns of re-allocation

including: no one is allowed to raise the counter above ground/floor level, leave any of their belongings at *pola* overnight or stay after 10pm. Security guards were hired to make sure everybody followed the rules and the *pola* was forced to become a highly controlled, government-owned marketplace that makes outsiders feel safer than the insiders. This is precisely the structure assumed in almost all studies.

That is when the vendors noticed the mismatch between their *pola* and the planner and designer's desired image of *pola*. The design, its details and ideologies behind the same were far from the *pola* and its people even at the most practical level. Fish stalls did not have spaces to store fish stocks and ice under the counters; the roof was too tall to cover last two rows of vendors at each side from sun and rain during 12-15 hour-long *pola* day; the floor of the structure (the main platform) of both main structures are too tall for majority of the customers to climb and the number of entry points designed to the main structure are not enough to create a dense circulation of customers.

Although it began 'functioning,' the *pola* was almost destroyed by its upgrading. The number of vending spaces was smaller than the number of *pola* vendors. Small trust-based vendor groups that took care of each others' stalls for short periods during the long *pola* days were dissolved and the vendors were dispersed by the new space allocation mechanism. The customers were neither comfortable bending all the way to the floor to pick merchandise (due to cultural concerns, explained above), nor did they feel the merchandise displayed at ground level is as clean as before. (Kusum, 2015) All shop spaces were of the same size, although the requirement of each stall was different. The toilet had no capacity to serve a public place with a substantial floating population; the issue was exacerbated by locating *pola* toilets located right at the middle

of the city and not limiting to the vendors. The proximity to water tap, parking spaces and other facilities were not well thought. One experienced vendor was vocal with me:

They [planners and designers of the UDA] cannot design *polas* for us looking out from their air conditioned office rooms, if we were given half of the money they wasted on this we would have made something more efficient, something that serves the purpose....

Overall, the *pola* both as a community and as individuals realized that there is a lot to be corrected if *pola* space is to become a *pola* of the functioning kind. Thus, they started converting the UDA provided *pola* into a functional place for them. How subjects react to provided spaces beginning with coping and transform into lived spaces is well mapped out in Perera (2016: 218) (Figure 4.16)

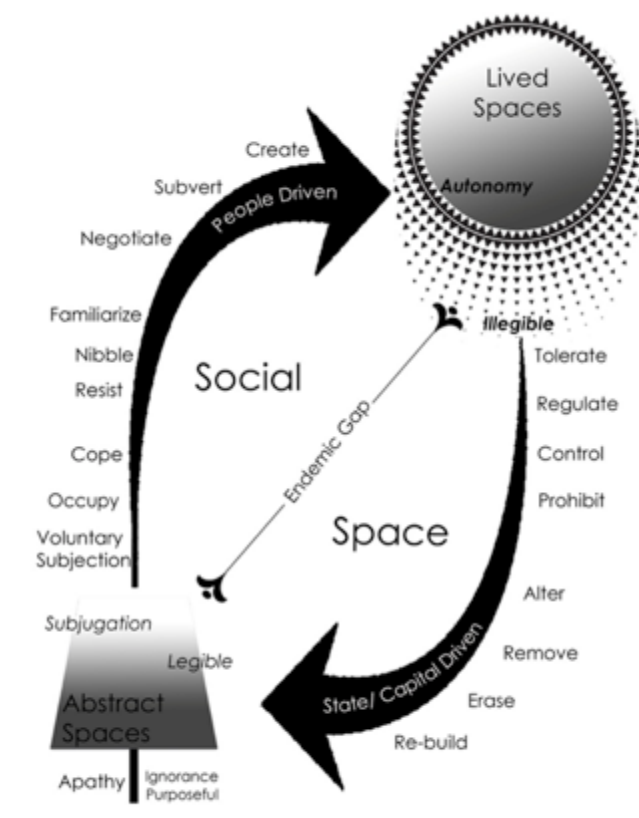


Figure 4.16: Production of people's spaces- schematic

At Maharagama Pola, Some vendors voluntarily subjected themselves to the highly regulated new *pola* space designed by architects within middle class values even if they were unclear about how to acknowledge or respond. The first step was to cope; some started friendships with new neighbors while others resisted upfront about the inefficiency of the new allocation of space highlighting the negative impacts of the designs made by powerful outsiders.

Many then began to nibble into the provided space, slowly changing its details. One night, some of the concrete bumpers that were placed around the main structure to stop *pola* service vehicles from reversing all the way to the edge of the main platform disappeared from their original places and the municipal council filed a police complaint against the *pola* community. I later walked around *pola* searching for these and found them being used as steps, along with used wooden pallets and cement blocks, creating more entry points to the larger structure and



Figure 4.17: Steps added by the pola community

facilitating
the
customers
by helping
them climb
up to the

main platform and back, navigating the *pola* landscape a bit easily. (Figure 4.17)

Some who did not get shop spaces or were not satisfied with the less accessible places they were given decided to adapt the spaces that were left out for parking and other services. The level of



Figure 4.18: re-purposed storm water collectors

creativity and resourcefulness invested in familiarizing and personalizing the space was unbelievable. Some re-purposed the empty concrete boxes that covered and facilitated the

collection points of rain water from gutter to drains as foundation using them as display tables or chairs of the newly added, created and/or extended vending spaces. (Figure 4.18)

Some added boxes made of wooden pallets to the edge of the main platform to extend the shop



Figure 4.19: Addition of new vending spaces



spaces. Ropes tied to the poles of the structures were stretched to the ground and the boundary wall to hold plastic sheets

that would shade newly added vending spaces. (Figure 4.19)

A long row of small vending spaces were arranged along one boundary of the *pola* land on the paved ground covered by cardboards or plastic sheets and shaded by umbrellas and other material. (Figure 4.20)



Figure 4.20: a row of added vending spaces

The two ladies who are employed by the private firm to clean *pola* after each *pola* day converted the store room of the toilet complex into a room in which they can sleep and make tea since public transport facilities were not available by the time they finish their cleaning job on the three *pola* days of the week. Ananda (Muwaa) who cooks breakfast and lunch for Maharagama Pola converted the unused backside of the second shelter (originally built for dry food stalls) in to a canteen. Some other unused spaces in the same structure were used for cleaning and preparation of merchandise during the less busy business hours of *pola*. (Figure 4.21)

The *pola* continues. As Perera (2016) argues, abstract space provided by authorities and planners



Figure 4.21: Re-purposed rear shelter, originally designed for dry food stalls

are not stable; the simple occupation transforms them. The vendors simply tried to cope with an incompatible space, but as they adapted themselves to the new structures and also familiarized the spaces they began to see more potential to push the boundaries. The *pola* is slowly transforming into an

ordinary *pola*, both defying and acknowledging the impositions. It is a dialogue with the imposed spaces, but the main actors are the *pola* people who operate within a weakening management structure.

A group of more powerful permanent vendors (a wealthy group of coconut sellers) negotiated with the Municipal Council to construct regular shop spaces around the main *pola* structure for them. They demanded that these shops must be lockable from outside and should be permitted to operate as normal shops that are open every day, (not only on *pola* days). The local authority



Figure 4.22: new permanent shop structures being built around Pola

first listened to them and started to build shops around main *pola* structure. (Figure 4.22) Building on this incident, the *pola* community negotiated with the local authority to allow creation of additional shop spaces around the main structures until the local authority can provide a

more concrete solution. The Municipal Council agreed to tolerate and/or allow the creation of new spaces by small actors provided that they pay a smaller ground rent.

In this, even the authorities are changing the structure, but according to their needs of management; they are transforming the *pola* (structure) from an unmanageable space to a manageable institution. The chief *pola* supervisor at Maharagama Municipal Council told me that they are discussing the possibility of providing flexible structures that can be used to accommodate this user group.

These negotiations subverted the agency of the local authority (the state) and opened up space for the creation of a new *pola* that works for the people. This new *pola* is not what the planners or the municipality imagined, aspired or provided, neither what the *pola* community desired or expected from the state. Yet, this new version is the best that can be created using the spaces, material, challenges and opportunities and other tangible and intangible resources the *pola* community was served with. Ironically, if not for the agency of the *pola* community to occupy, cope, nibble, familiarize, negotiate, subvert and recreate a *pola* (in a compromised form) that is modern from within, through their creativity and resourcefulness, the “modern” *pola* that the state wanted to impose would have easily failed. For the *pola* people who reestablished the *pola*, it was an unnecessary, unfortunate and costly trip.

Inter-*pola* Sharing of Experience and Lessons

The learning processes at *pola* are not limited by the boundaries of any single *pola*: Learning from the experience of Maharagama Pola, Malabe-Pola community is now mapping their aspirations for a modern *pola* space. Mimicking the ways in which the government and the other *pola* communities operated before, during and after the modernization/ re-development of other *polas*, it is re-shaping and preparing its *pola* organization to negotiate a new identity. Its members also learn and follow the formal sector organization mechanisms like meeting, maintaining financial records, developing letterheads and writing memos. In addition, they strengthen their *pola* community from within through the frequent engagement with the local government, local community and by uniting their own community through collective religious and recreation activities.

In response to my inquiry regarding these newly learned and adapted traits the leader of Malabe Pola (Chuti Malli) responded: “We need to operate at official capacity like the government does, we need to be sure of what we want from them. This is what we are aiming at...” I found this a bit similar to mimicry (Bhabha 1994) not only because they work like the government, but also because they do so to stand strong in front of or maybe against the government. They do not wish to become like the government by mimicking the ways in which the government work. Yet they wish to be able to stand on equal grounds or close to the powerful position from which the government operates, so they will at least be heard. In this, they try to use the same language so the government will have to understand them.



Figure 4.23: spaces of socializing at Malabe pola

Unfortunately, the Maharagama Pola did not foresee the cleansing of non-economic aspects of *pola*-scape; but with the evidence of the state intervention charged by the determination to convert Maharagama Pola into a mere modern marketplace, through design and by the strict control of the use of space, Malabe Pola community is determined to save its smaller non-economic spaces including places where the *pola* actors socialize, eat and worship. (Figure 4.23) Thus it is clear that the state intervention have only made the Maharagama and other *polas* of the

same circuit, more resilient and strong from within, only because they rely on the agency of its actors rather than the generosity of the state.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Significant component of Sri Lankan modernity: The restructuring and continuity of the *pola* despite roadblocks

My attempt to make some sense of the *pola* made me see *pola*-people's creativity, entrepreneurship and their processes of negotiation for better urban opportunities. The *pola* actors are like the post-colonial, 'half-baked men' in *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga (2008). They are the ordinary people in India (men and women, the way Adiga uses the term) who could not get mainstream education and/or graduate from high school. They are not the expected products created through mainstream options. Unlike for graduates, there are no jobs waiting for them when they become adults; they neither work for companies nor wear nice suits, but become adults who take orders from others.

The half-baked are 'entrepreneurs' made from half-baked clay (described above), who thrive on their own ideas and entrepreneurship. They are challenged to create their own. The majority of the city, these entrepreneurs, who creates opportunities in the cracks and the margins of the dominant system and their entrepreneurship, goes disregarded. Their entrepreneurship is either viewed as threatening to the state and planners whose desire is to have complete control over its space and subjects.

Kleptocrats in McClintok's (1992) "The Angels of Progress" represents the corrupt officials and the middle class that rules the space and people in post-colonial countries. The language and the ways in which the half-baked operate are inaccessible to 'fully baked' planners, policy makers

and the middle class in general. As demonstrated in the thesis, the involvement of politicians and planners challenges the power balance the *pola* maintains with the local and regional level governance. The difference between the understandings of politicians and planners and that of *pola* actors is expressed as a conflict between the desire to impose general rules over the subjects and their struggle for the right to the *pola* and the city. The active resistance and the following tactful negotiations make up the *pola*.

The *pola* actors have a longer history than this and, for the most part, avoid the destruction of their achievement. Behind the newly built structures imposed on *polas* by the state, or the airplane hangars as the *pola* people call them, are particular ideals of Modernity borrowed from the so-called modern world and believed by the middle class. The designs focus on the economy, efficiency and political desires, making the *pola* the institution become somewhat secondary to the structure. The *pola* people and the institution too have a range of culturally, economically and environmentally grounded modernities. Such ingenuous forms of modernity are produced by ordinary (*pola*-) people simply as a vehicle to navigate the increasingly challenging urban environments. However, both the professionals and academics are far from seeing the value, and complexity of these everyday forms of modernity.

For politicians, planners and policy makers who see through their own frameworks and vantage points, locally produced social spaces like *handiya*, *para* and *pola* have very low importance. According to them, these are backward institutions belonging to history and have no hope. Yet what the producers of new *pola* structures do not see is, what they do is temporary and a roadblock to the longer *pola* process. In the words of the director of the project unit of the UDA, “We cannot explain everything to the people because we plan for the long term.” It implies either

people do not see the long-term, or the people will not be there for that long and no point in explaining long term plans to them.

Yet according to my findings, *pola* the institution had been there before these interventions and will be there long after the planners and politicians are gone. Looking back from fifty years from now, what the planners do will look like the imposition of a roadblock to the journey of the *pola*. Therefore the gap is not between tradition and modernity, or the past and future, but the one between the actual *pola* and the perceived and/or desired *pola* in these professionals' and academics' minds.

The *pola* people gradually familiarize the state provided structures (Chapter Four). Focusing on the economy, efficiency and political desires, these *pola* structures are meant to conduct political meetings and commercial exhibitions on non-*pola* days. According to UDA's *pola* report, this is to achieve the optimal use of the land and the maximizing of the return on investment. Thus they prefer one large even floor with a roof. For many health, cleanliness and cultural the vendors do not agree with this reasons (See Chapter 4). Thus the state came up with rule saying that nobody can raise the display area which will hide the neighboring vendors from the customer's sight. This gave birth to many conflicts among the *pola* community and the leader of the *pola* community was perceived as an agent of the government. *Pola* the institution has become secondary to the grand physical structure. Also, the *pola* people became displaced and disoriented within the *pola*.

As evident in this study, the *pola* has an **economic meaning**. The capitalist viewpoint that it is a market is not untrue, but it is not merely a commercial space or market. It can never be reduced to a commercial building as what the planners are proposing and the state is building. *Pola* is a

place where life is shared along with its economic aspects. The inclusion of social, cultural and other aspects of the *pola* requires the broadening the vantage point, frame and focus (Perera 2016).

This thesis reveals that it is a place of exchange and meeting with a substantial economic role, but not simply a market place. The *pola* is a local place, public space and a redistribution network of goods, ideas and social capital. Yet, *pola* people work and earn while they live, quite different to earning for living. Some like Tony plans to earn what he needs by about 2pm and leaves the *pola* opening room for another vendor. Also, the *pola* might survive even if its particular economic role dies: As demonstrated in Chapter Three, the “death “ of the wholesale *pola* at Kottawa gave rise to a retail *pola*.

Pola (as the *handiya* and self-built settlements) is **not an abstract space** created by the state or capital. The *pola* neither grew in a crack of the (formal) urban space, nor is it a byproduct of the formal economy or society. The *pola* (as the *handiya*) is **older than the formal system**. It is the state and capital that attempts to push it to the past and the margins of its systems.

The *Pola*, along with other local spaces such the *handiya*, were crucial instigators **of the creation of urban areas** in Sri Lanka. In Kottawa, these include in the Pola Handiya and Angaharuwada Pola. The middle-class environment followed these. Some spaces such as the Sikurada Pola died as part of the restructuring process. Without paying attention to this process, the planners and policy makers strangely wonder where did the *pola* came from.

Informality as a category and label is unable to capture and/or reveal anything about the *pola*, but other than the poverty of the mainstream language/ discourse. Hence, it is **illegible** to the

formal society, particularly the planners and policy makers. Unlike **land use** and other governing concepts such as tax, address, identity and numbering which binds people to one specific location/site of work, the live places of *pola* places it outside the frame of middle class and state's capacity of understanding. Rather than acknowledging this lack, the formal knowledge renders it a moribund institution belonging to the past. The incapacities of the "powerful" mainstream systems thus challenge the existence of *pola*, while the *pola* itself places it outside the concepts of the authorities.

Moreover, **the image** of the *pola* in the mindset of providers is **few decades older** than the contemporary *pola*. Their designs provide outdated spaces to *pola* actors. For example, no electricity is provided in the new structures to operate individual scales and no adjustable lighting system that enables to focus light on merchandise as the vendor wishes. By imposing large-scale, overpowering image and symbols of its modernity, the state and the planners ridicules people's journeys, humiliates the individuals and their individuality and condemns the modernity of the *pola* community. The *pola* is neither traditional, nor modern but as elaborated in Chapter Four, **transtemporal and translocal**. Every modification comes from within the *pola* is a new way to be modern in one aspect or the other and most are connected to places faraway places, some overseas.

The *pola* (as the *handiya*) is a **platform for life journeys created by people themselves**. It is made up of a mixture of transformative activities based on non-discriminatory and relaxed values than a state-provided uniform and blanket solution that restricts action. *Pola* serves the diversity of people who benefit from being part of it while the state forces the people to be uniform in order to benefit their plan. It opens numerous avenues for creative and resourceful processes and

through which people to build different livelihood opportunities, at any scale and through any arrangement of the work force such as family labor, social capital, apprenticeship and/or wage labor.

The compatibility of the needs and interests of vendors and customers **repeatedly brings the same actors together**. As they come to know each other, it expands the set of possible relationships among them and the activities they can engage in through, outside, and beyond the *pola*. In this way, the *pola* expands in terms of the size and diversity of each actor's community or personal network. Such connections have led to relationships including marriages and life-long friendships.

It is a closely-knit small community, but with various groupings. The community support for Seelawathie after her back problem, discussed in Chapter Three, well illustrates the comradery. The community is not homogenous but is made up of small groups developed due to common interests, concerns and/or the work.

Pola is **not anarchic**. It is operated, guided and controlled through values that are commonly respected. Some minimum control takes place in non-oppressive, non violent and non-embarrassing ways that embraces on-the-go arrangements which are not pre-made. This keeps the trust and community values ultra important while the satisfaction comes out of producing new places, figuring out new tactics and negotiating new space keeps *pola* life exciting and provides on-the-job learning to all actors irrespective of their age or job experience.

Pola is very **well organized**, but not (planned) before occupation. Maharagama (new) *Pola* committee had a numbering system that gave a membership number to each stall/ actor. Yet it

was established after trying so many different arrangements of space allocation by individuals and groups for decades, the new space management system begins by allocating similar size spaces to all actors without the opportunity of exchanging places to figure out human combinations that work for them. Friends can exchange code numbers, yet numbers can hardly make incompatible people friends. This challenges the whole *pola* system that operates builds and thrives on social capital. The planned *polas* have never matched the *pola* organization.

Polas **have rules**, but never invented before the problem. While the state suspects its citizens and prepares rules to control them even before they misbehave, the “*pola*” trusts its people and let them grow through trial and error, correcting the errors but without punishing the whole person or the family that rely on him/her. This benevolent control makes people enjoy what they do and the people they travel with.

The *pola* **works on values and priorities** in place of formal methods, procedures and regulations. Therefore the *pola* works even when some actors fail. Improvisation, in both acting individually and/or forming social capital to build on, is celebrated and valued, but guided by commonly agreed values and norms.

Each person has individual **freedom and agency** which is trusted upon and respected by others. Everyone is expected to respect common values when exercising their agency to reach their individual goals and/or when shaping their journeys. The actors respect the system that **enables them to become themselves**. Thus the control at *pola* is based on appreciation, community approval and encouragement rather than fear and punishment.

Pola community welcomes the **actors** who join the *pola* **community**, although the government relies on a list of names that are registered in an office. Providing a new structure with new vending spaces in this context produced numerous confusions over ownership and gave birth to a conflict over **the right to *pola*** which did not exist before.

Pola is therefore a **socially constructed public space**. Sri Lankans do not separate socializing, relaxing, errands and routines. Converting *pola* in to mere commercial spaces and opening up new urban parks will only create a dishonest/ not grounded public culture. This area of research on public spaces has to be expanded.

Pola **is built on and drives on social capital** where the capital relies on human resources. This way the *pola* structures and operations depend on people; people exist in them and their agency is acknowledged, as compared to formal structures which are impersonal. Yet the people at *pola* when they approach the state, they approach people in it (See Perera and Pradhan 2016). This is highlighted in the story in which the Maharagama *Pola* community curses the Maharagama Municipal Council by smashing coconuts on temple grounds (See Chapter Four). Here the officers at the Council were afraid of how the curse might impact their personal success. The acts that dissolve formal structure are many and include bribes and personal favors.

Social capital and support systems are not exclusive, i.e., someone's property: When someone enters the *pola* s/he completely relies on social capital. According to my knowledge, no bank provides a loan to begin a business at *pola*. With time, the beginners build capacity to get the formal system to support some of their projects, such as buying a vehicles and open a regular shop in town. However, the original social capital that produced a very useful network of interdependence remains the core of the *pola*.

Hence the *pola* is a string organization that has a past and a future. It runs on its own resources, particularly people and social capital. It existed long before the nation state and may last longer than it. The state interventions are therefore roadblocks that it is in the process of overcoming. It is done through both engaging and going beyond the state programs and by passing them.

Interventions: Stop bothering, let it be, Support

Pola is **included into both landscapes of the state and capital**. Yet the *pola* is not represented as it is, but for what it can be to serve the state and capital and the formal system better. The state manages and provides structures to *polas* owned and/or operated by the state. Also intervenes into privately owned (And managed) *polas* based on *sanukampitha padanama matha* (sympathetic reasons) during a crisis situation. Yet as highlighted above, the state is at the mercy of *pola*, can intervene into the *pola* only if they let them control it. With the difference in language and perception, the state has very little control.

Capital also competes with the *pola*: supermarkets such as Cargills and Keells attempts to take the business away from the *pola*. They adapt the product range of the *pola* and complement its rhythm; for example, they attract the *pola* customers by enabling the payment of bills during weekends and other *pola* days so the *pola*-goers would also visit these supermarkets to buy other items that are not available at *pola*. Also the National Savings Bank goes to all the *polas* and provides mobile savings facility, thus identifying and including *pola* community into their customer base.

Forms of **modernity** promoted by the state are compatible with the values of the middle class and not the *pola* community, or ordinary people at large. Here I largely refer to the modernity

that frames and celebrates tradition and the modernity expressed through imported symbols of the modernity in the West. The ingenious modernity that emerges from the needs of diverse populations who operate through personalized individual perceptions of modernity is not compatible with above two types of modernity and the binary thinking involved in it. As it is hard to understand, imagine, predict or control, the state has no clue on how to deal with these local ways of achieving modernity or with ordinary people who invent such ways.

Hence, the **frameworks and/or worldviews of external providers** like the state or capital are incapable of providing *polas* that would fulfill the dreams of the *pola* community. It is not due to intention as most planners, politicians and other officers involved wish well and want to see the *polas* succeed. The issue is their inability to appreciate the needs of their client (ordinary people) (see Perera 2016). If planners can see the beauty and efficacy of what people build and help them further develop the *pola* based on their values, the “redevelopment” could be promising.

Some of the **new values imposed by the state** along with the new structures **divided the *pola* community** into groups, hierarchies and turn some of these against others; this damages the spirit of *pola* and threatens its economic productivity and existence. The economic prosperity the *pola* has demonstrated throughout past decades is not simply based on commercial values. Any intervention that is not informed of these social values behind *pola*’s success cannot bring much development or justice to *pola* communities.

Hence, the **state provided *polas* cannot grow** in the intended direction: they are unable to absorb the people who like to explore new avenues to build their life in the city. State-provided

pola in Maharagama, for example, imprisoned each vendor in a six sqft area¹ and there is no space for all existing vendors. There is a rule that absolutely prevents future expansion and entry of new vendors. In contrast **the *polas* people make have enormous flexibility to expand** its space and diversify including new (needy) members. This does not mean there is totally free entry as such. However, if they run out of structures, other available spaces will be used to build new structures; if they run out of floor space the shops grow in to floor spaces of trucks; if *pola* site is fully occupied *pola* can grow along adjacent roads, operating through mobile structures and/or personal vehicles converted into shops; these actors make use of *pola* without really becoming a part of it (See Chapter Three). This illustrates how space becomes fluid when controlled by diversification rather than limiting.

If owning a space is not a necessity or a possibility there are other ways of owning a ‘spot’ at *pola* communities; one can become a floating member (See Chapter 3), a mobile member, an in-between-structures member. At Moratumulla, the shops and houses along the street rented out tables and spaces in their shop front when *pola* site ran out of space. This flexibility, resourcefulness and creativity cannot be provided by outsiders, but needs to be achieved by those who deal with that space, material and processes on everyday basis; they see the room for maneuvering between everyday spaces and processes and the multiple uses and the transformability of everyday material outside their conventional use.

Going beyond finding accommodation within the state-provided *pola*, they push the boundaries hard, **widening the room for intervention** and the room for maneuvering. *Pola* the institution thus **negotiates the externally imposed ideas** as much as spaces. The concept of time too is

¹ Planners say that they provide 7’x8’ and 6’X7’ spaces. The vendors use the common term, the 6-foot area. Perhaps they complain about the length, six feet, which is inadequate.

different from the fish vendor to the DVD vendor. The concept of floor space combines the *pola* ground and floors of the vehicles; the expansion of room is done at both horizontal and vertical sense. (A new ground sheet vs a new table at the height of old table) Both time and space can be fluid and have no uniform density or have uneven thickness at *pola*.

In Sum

The *pola* is an ingenious creation by these half-baked entrepreneurs through negotiations with the system and kleptocrats. It stands up with strategies that were never expected from the half-baked *pola* occupants. What I have attempted in the thesis is to talk about these half-baked people's strategies that created the *pola* understood through post-colonial concepts like mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence and the work on space by Perera, Simone and the like.

The half-bakedness and the entrepreneurship have given them personalities to not to fit into any traps of so called 'city development' and they have enough wisdom and skills to create their own paths and spaces in the city. They are free to change the direction of their journey as individuals or groups as circumstances change; they are not committed to anyone's plan for them or even to their own plan. They are never late to begin new ways of life or new spaces to materialize those ways as their projects of development are not as rigid as the ones the government has for them.

Along with the *handiya*, *para* and the like, *pola* is a **driver of urban growth** and contributes to the changing cityness (Simone 2014). It is more pertinent to conserve this energy,

entrepreneurship and the institutions they have built and build on them, rather than destroy to create imaginary futures. A better approach to improving the *pola* than building large roofs is to work with the *pola* community. Planners can facilitate and guide the growth. For this, planners have a lot to unlearn. Rather than teach the *pola* what it should be, it is better for the planners to learn from the *pola*, what it is, what it is going to be and what roles the planners can play.

Seemingly the *pola* existed long before the nation state and the planning profession and the way the *pola* is restructuring it will be there long after the nation state and the planning profession as we know them. At the end, I did not have to document the disappearing *pola*. Instead the *pola* taught me how it has been and how it is continuing, overcoming the roadblocks thrown at it by the state, capital, and the planners. Nonetheless, the *pola* will not be the same; it will change as it deals with these roadblocks. Most fascinating to learn was the renewal process of the *pola* that makes it one of the most grounded modern institutions and spaces that the national state, local authorities and planners do not have a language to understand.

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